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NOVEL

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THOUGH I AM AN INEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat
Body Swap in the Maiden Court



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"If I
could have
any wish..."

"Begone, you
accursed
woman!"

On the night a comet shone bright,

the pair traded fates

Kō Reirin

Maiden of the Kō clan
Beautiful & benevolent
Frail & often sick
The prince's
butterfly

Shū Keigetsu

Maiden of the Shū clan
Freckled face & thick
makeup
The court sewer rat
Everyone's least favorite
villainess

"Covering for her? A so-called villainess should stick to what she knows."

Shin-ri

Captain of the Eagle Eyes

"You're the one who insists on disparaging my best efforts!"

Leelee

Low-ranking court lady of the Shu Maiden

"Keigetsu, you poor thing! I can see you've lost your bearings. It's all right, my precious Maiden."

Shu Gabi

Noble Consort

"Know your place as a villainess and conduct yourself accordingly."

Ei Gyomei

The crown prince & the empress's son

"How dare you address me with such familiarity."

Kou Tousetsu

Reirin's head court lady

"Shu Keigetsu. If you're that determined, I shall grant you your chance."

Kou Kenshuu

Empress

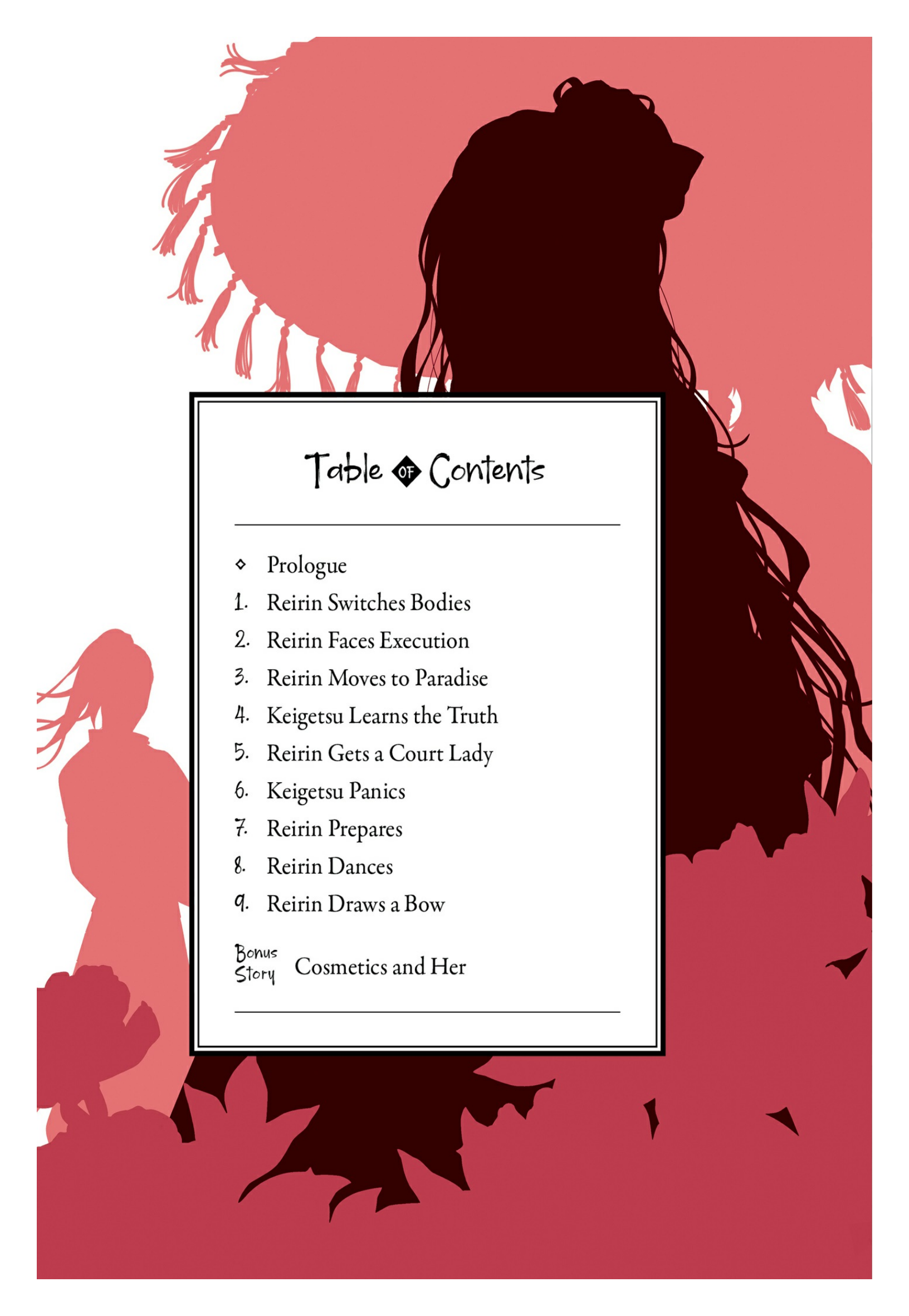


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THOUGH I AM AN UNEPT VILLAINESS

Tale of the Butterfly-Rat
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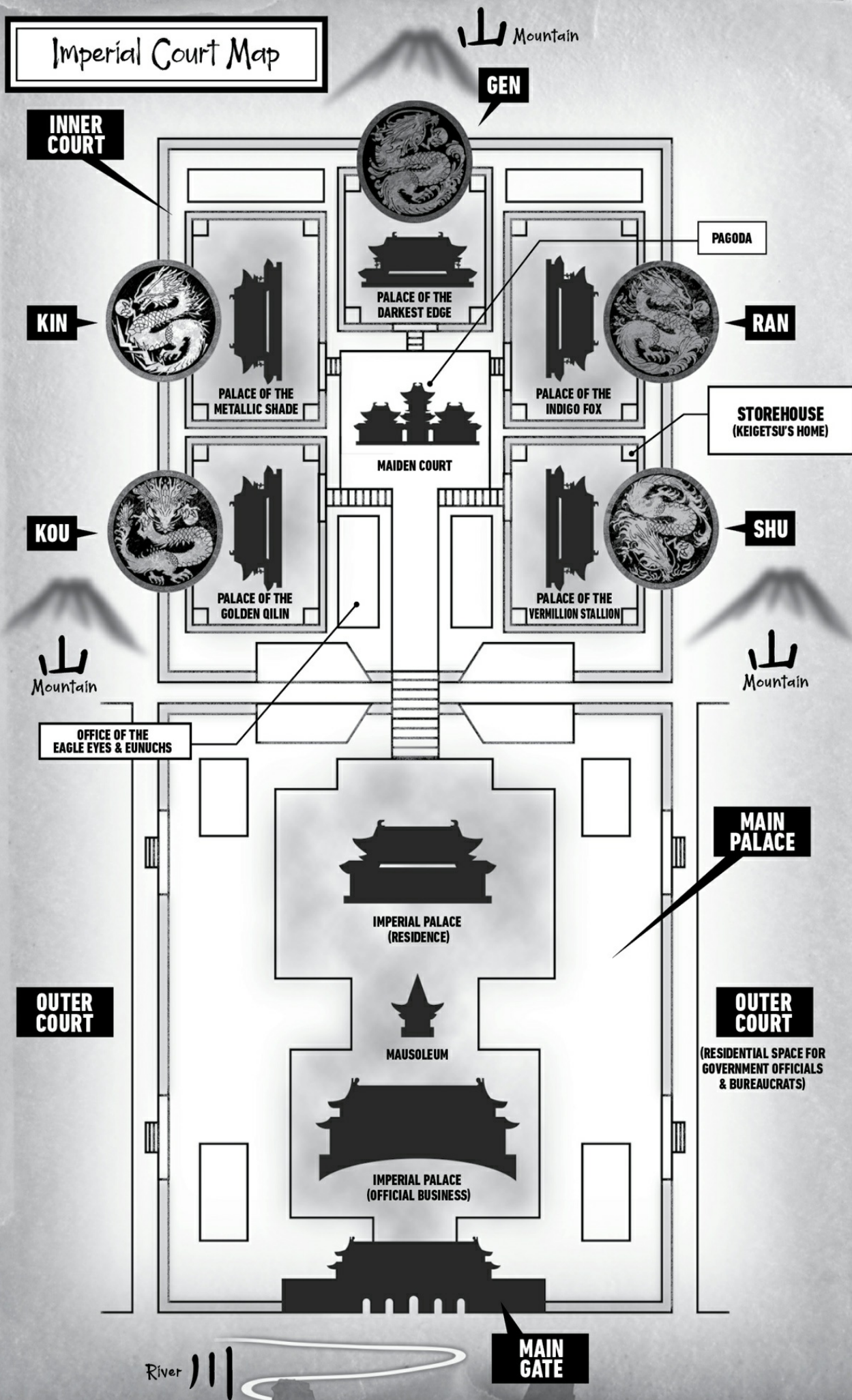
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Kana Yuki



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Imperial Court Map



Relationship Chart

The clan that governs the lands to the west and rules over metal. Their signature season is autumn, signature direction is west, and signature color is white. Chops wood and collects water. Divided into two factions of pragmatic merchants and artists. Mainline descendants tend to be artsy types who prize aesthetic and philosophy. People who can make a profit from extolling beauty.

KIN CLAN
(METAL / WEST / AUTUMN)



KOU CLAN
(EARTH / CENTER / CUSPS)

The clan that governs the central territory and rules over earth. Their signature season is the four cusps, signature direction is the center, and signature color is yellow. Obstructs water and bears metal. Straightforward, unpretentious, and full of natural-born caretakers. Mainline descendants tend to have a pioneering spirit and be as steadfast as the earth itself. People who can make it through the biggest of catastrophes with nothing but a "dearie me."

GEN CLAN
(WATER / NORTH / WINTER)



The clan that governs the lands to the north and rules over water. Their signature season is winter, signature direction is north, and signature color is black. Dampens (suppresses) fire and nourishes (enhances) wood. Aloof and unfazed by carrying out the most inhumane of acts. On the other hand, can latch on hard to the right target. Many are proficient in the military arts.

RAN CLAN
(WOOD / EAST / SPRING)



The clan that governs the lands to the east and rules over wood. Their signature season is spring, signature direction is east, and signature color is blue. Parts earth and feeds fire. Passive and mild mannered, the majority tend to be gentle scholars, but some have a scheming and sinister side to them.



SHU CLAN
(FIRE / SOUTH / SUMMER)

The clan that governs the lands to the south and rules over fire. Their signature season is summer, signature direction is south, and signature color is red. Melts metal and produces earth. Full of intense personalities and show-offs. Prone to wild mood swings and value emotion over reason. People who hate and love with equal intensity.

THE MAIDEN COURT



Futsutsukana Akujodewa Gozaimasuga Vol. 1
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Prologue

IT WAS THE NIGHT of the Double Sevens Festival. Inside a pagoda tucked away in the inner court, the well-dressed court ladies let admiring sighs escape from behind their fans.

“Take a look at Lady Reirin’s most splendid embroidery! Do you see how the moonlight reflects off the bright threads of her stars? Why, it’s almost like a real night sky!”

“So it is! Even the Weaver Girl herself would envy her skill.”

These girls were captivated by a delicately embroidered length of silk and the highborn lady who had hung it over the balustrade. Her soft shades of black hair were pulled back into a gorgeous style, and her large, round eyes held a smile as vibrant as a flower coming into bloom. Together with her porcelain skin, she possessed a fragile sort of beauty. This fifteen-year-old girl was called Reirin.

Beside Reirin, four more ladies of noble birth held their embroidery for all to see. On the night of the Double Sevens Festival—the sole day of the year when the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl were reunited—these girls were to offer their handiwork up to the starry heavens in hopes of improving their sewing skills. This tradition also happened to serve as a contest of their needlework, but it was easy to see that Reirin’s work far outshined the rest.

The women went on whispering among themselves.

“Her skill with a needle is on par with the Weaver Girl’s, and with a brush in her hand, she can string together the most elegant of verses. If I recall, the dance she performed for the Lantern Festival even moved one of the court ladies to tears. She’s truly a girl of many talents.”

“And she has the looks to match! If all that wasn’t enough, can you believe how compassionate she is? I heard from one of her court ladies that she wouldn’t crush an insect under her heel! Oh, what I wouldn’t give to serve under her!”

“Shh! Not so loud. You wouldn’t want *your* mistress to overhear. Though being a retainer of the magnanimous Ran clan, I doubt you’d be in for too harsh

a reprimand.”

“You’re right. Our lady is our master. If we break the laws of the Maiden Court, the Eagle Eyes will have us put to death. We’d better watch what we say.”

The Maiden Court was the very place where those five well-born ladies and their attendants were gathered.

Nearly a hundred years ago, a bloody power struggle that had broken out during the reign of Emperor Kousou saw the reorganization of the bloated inner court, and consorts were now selected from a mere five clans.

The Ran clan, who ruled over the lands to the east.

The Kin clan, who ruled over the lands to the west.

The Gen clan, who ruled over the lands to the north.

The Shu clan, who ruled over the lands to the south.

And the Kou clan, the rulers of the central territory.

The five aristocrats sent from each clan were to be divided up into one empress and four consorts. They spent their days in their respective palaces, which were arranged in a pentagon around the inner court, taking care to uphold the established order all the while.

But of course, these five clans were perpetually in competition with one another; it wouldn’t have been any fun for one family to monopolize all the glory. Moreover, the fact that the emperor—who until that point had possessed thousands of concubines—was forced to find an heir from only five women raised concerns over the dynasty’s longevity. Given what vast lands the Kingdom of Ei boasted, the country needed a firm hand to guide it.

So it was that the five clans worked together to build a cloister leading from each palace, converging on the “Maiden Court” erected at their center. It was purported to be a place of study for unmarried girls, where they would receive etiquette training from the emperor’s consorts, the finest women of their time. These students—referred to as fledgling “Maidens”—would grow as close to their teachers as their own mothers. In addition to the guarantee of a stable

livelihood in the Maiden Court, each girl was granted a room within her respective consort's palace.

In practice, however, the only girls permitted entry to the Maiden Court were those with ties to one of the five clans. In other words, this was a training program for the consorts' successors under the guise of an etiquette school. The consorts put their skills to the test to see who could raise their Maiden the best, aiming to make their protégé into the next empress and bring prestige to their clan.

The current emperor, Genyou, was past the age of forty. The Maiden Court had been opened to a new generation, and Reirin and the other four girls had been assembled to fill its ranks. Until the crown prince, Gyoumei, ascended the throne, these girls were to spend every daylight hour in the Maiden Court, competing to determine who possessed the highest value as a woman.

However, when it came to this particular generation of the Maiden Court, it was safe to say that the winner had been decided long before the day of appointment arrived. Anyone could see that Reirin was the clear choice to become the next empress.

Reirin was the niece of the current empress, Kou Kenshuu, as well as cousin to Prince Gyoumei. It's said that names and natures do often agree, and Reirin—her name meaning “the chime of jewelry”—boasted a graceful bearing and features as refined as a gem. Add to this the fact that she was erudite, talented, and good-hearted besides, and it was little wonder that all those she knew couldn't help but adore her.

After she had lost her mother in nearly the same moment she was born, her father, brothers, and the rest of the Kou clan had taken great pity on the beautiful young girl and loved her unconditionally. Taken by the affection she had shown him from a young age, Gyoumei seemed to have settled on her as his empress already.

Reirin had but one shortcoming: She had a weak constitution and was often laid up with fever. However, in the present Genyou Era, delicacy and grace were prized above all else. Her snow-white skin and slender, frail figure were hailed as the pinnacle of beauty, and her unwavering virtue in the face of her ailing

health inspired even greater compassion in those around her. Even within the Maiden Court, where it was the way of things to look down upon the Maidens of the other clans, Reirin was widely beloved and respected.

“Did you catch the subtle way His Highness placed a hand on her shoulder as she leaned over the balustrade? Oh, how perfectly matched they are in their beauty! It’s no wonder she’s called the prince’s ‘butterfly.’”

“Indeed. See how proud her retainers look? For all her poise, even her head court lady can’t help but crack a smile. Honestly, if everyone knows the outcome, I don’t see why we shouldn’t close the Maiden—”

“Shh! The captain of the Eagle Eyes will hear you!”

The prince was only allowed to set foot inside the Maiden Court for the observance of each seasonal festival. Much like the Cowherder anxiously awaited his reunion with the Weaver Girl, the gorgeous Gyomei had been delighted to descend upon the court and take every opportunity to connect with Reirin. The court ladies had been watching the pair in rapt fascination, but with a backward glance, they hurried to school their expressions.

In a dark corner of the room, far from where everyone had gathered around the balcony overlooking the garden to gaze up at the night sky, there sat a man dressed in black from head to toe. This gentleman, whose face showed not a flicker of expression in the presence of all these stunning women, was the captain of the Eagle Eyes—the officials responsible for enforcing discipline in the inner court. His name was Shin-u. Save for the calculating look in his eyes, he had been blessed with rather handsome features.

Men were forbidden to enter the inner palace; traditionally, the Eagle Eyes’ ranks were comprised of eunuchs. However, there was a good explanation as to why a man—and such an attractive one, at that—was serving as the captain of the order: He was a descendant of the emperor.

Meanwhile, his mother had been anything but a daughter of one of the five clans; as a foreign slave, she’d never stood a chance of becoming a consort. A hundred years ago, she might have been granted the position of a lower concubine, but there was no place for her in the modern incarnation of the inner court. Instead, she had been dismissed with a reward, and her son, Shin-u,

had been taken in by a childless military officer and raised as a vassal. Despite demonstrating great skill in the art of war, his complicated lineage had ultimately consigned him to the inner court. On the off chance he *did* lie with one of the women, it would be immediately apparent if the child was Shin-u's. Though the man's black hair was common enough, his blue eyes were an impossibly rare sight among the people of Ei.

His role was to resolve any violent disputes that arose within the inner court and to root out any women who proved vulnerable to temptation. Several court ladies had already made advances toward him, drawn to his good looks, and been imprisoned for their trouble. Ever since, the girls had come to fear Shin-u as a ruthless executioner.

Fortunately, the cold-blooded captain of the Eagle Eyes hadn't taken offense to their irreverent comments. His only responsibility was to crack down on serious transgressions or scandals, and he held little interest in idle gossip. As soon as the girls remembered as much, relief washed over them, and they went right back to their imprudent chatter.

"We all know that Lady Reirin is the empress's favorite, and His Highness cares for her just as deeply. The throne is as good as hers. My Maiden even said that she's given up on the position of empress and set her sights on becoming the Noble Consort."

Ordered from highest to lowest, the ranks of the four consorts were the Noble, the Pure, the Virtuous, and the Worthy.

"The same goes for mine. She'd hate to take the title of the Worthy for the second generation in a row. But then again..." She broke off and cast a meaningful glance toward the balustrade. "She's fortunate to be in the same batch as Shu Keigetsu. There's no question who the Worthy Consort is going to be."

The court ladies' eyes held an unmistakable glint of disdain. The subject of their gaze was the girl standing next to Reirin, a Maiden by the name of Keigetsu.

Her hairstyle was crooked, and perhaps in an effort to offset her freckled, sinister features, she'd dressed herself in garish attire. Her embroidery left

something to be desired. Never from her lips fell a pretty line of poetry, and she would clam up whenever Gyoumei went out of his way to speak to her; then the moment he turned his gaze elsewhere, she would cast a woebegone glance his way and a baleful glare at Reirin.

It was a well-known fact that Keigetsu pined for Gyoumei with his good looks, virile charm, and mastery of the pen and sword, as was it common knowledge among the court ladies that she was deeply jealous of Reirin.

“Now there’s a girl who doesn’t know her place. Her ungainly frame is the only ‘grand’ thing about her, and there’s always a sneer in her eyes—the very picture of the court ‘sewer rat’! And to think *her* guardian is the most prestigious of the four consorts, Noble Consort Shu! The world works in mysterious ways.”

“I heard Consort Shu chose Lady Keigetsu as her Maiden out of pity. She couldn’t turn her back on the most wretched of her relatives. The depth of Lady Keigetsu’s ineptitude speaks to the depth of Consort Shu’s compassion.”

Though it sounded like she was speaking in Keigetsu’s defense, in reality, her words bore nothing but the utmost contempt. And it was no wonder why—the Maiden had a reputation for fawning on her superiors while coming down hard on those below her. As these girls were privy to the grumblings of Keigetsu’s own court ladies, there was no one more despicable in their eyes. The nickname they had given her was the court “sewer rat.” It was a far cry from Reirin, who was extolled as the prince’s “butterfly” for her place in his good graces.

From their cloth-covered seats upon a raised section of the floor, the empress and four consorts watched over the fledgling Maidens. Even they didn’t bother to hide their sighs and sneers over Keigetsu’s boorish conduct. Discomfited, her guardian tried to redirect the conversation.

“My, do you see that? Comets. There’s even a shooting star! How auspicious,” said Noble Consort Shu. And indeed, a glance in the direction her fan pointed revealed a parade of stars leaving their trails through the night sky.

Some time ago, predictions held that this summer would mark the first sighting of a comet in hundreds of years, and the Maiden Court’s pagoda had been constructed in time to see it happen. Excitement bubbled within the

crowd. Everyone was delighted that the comets' advent had not only coincided perfectly with the night of the Double Sevens Festival but that it had even arrived with a shooting star to wish upon.

"Oh, we have to make a wish before it disappears! Though given how slowly it's moving by, we ought to have plenty of time."

"The big, slow one is a comet, silly! You're supposed to make your wish on the star streaking by over there. Oh no! There it goes. Looks like I missed my chance."

"Don't be so sure! Here comes another one! And another!"

"Wow, that's quite a number..."

The meteor shower grew in intensity until it looked almost like a rain of light. The onlookers devoured the sight, their breath stolen by the miraculous spectacle.

And then...

Just as a single comet in the swarm of meteors shone so brightly it nearly blotted the sky in white, there came a dull thud.

"Begone, you accursed woman!"

"Eeeek!"

That spiteful shout and the piercing cry that followed snapped the court ladies to their senses. They looked in the direction of the voices, only to find Reirin dangerously close to tumbling over the balustrade.

"Reirin!"

"Lady Reirin, take my hand!"

"Eagle Eyes! Help her!"

Gyoumei and the court ladies spun on their heels, throwing themselves out over the balustrade like a crowd possessed. Alas, their efforts were in vain, and Reirin's hand slipped past the railing as she slammed down against the eaved roof below.

"Reirin!"

Fortunately, the long trail of her *ruqun*'s skirt caught on the balustrade like a lifeline, bringing her descent to a halt.

Seeing this, Gyomei began barking orders, flames of anger burning in his calm, light-brown eyes. "Captain, rescue Reirin at once! The remaining Eagle Eyes are to take that woman—Shu Keigetsu—into custody!"

The subject of his glare was none other than Shu Keigetsu's limp, unconscious figure, her arms left outstretched from shoving Reirin over the balustrade.

Awakened by a drop of water hitting her cheek, the girl let her eyes drift open.

"Ugh..."

She felt unusually thirsty. Rubbing at her throat, she sat upright and then frowned in puzzlement at the damp clumps of hair clinging to her face.

I feel gross...

Although she was no stranger to physical discomfort, this particular sensation of stewing in squalor was an unfamiliar one. Brushing her fingers through her disheveled hair, she strained her eyes against the dim light of the room.

"Hm...?"

Her hand stopped moving. What she saw before her was not the familiar sight of her bed and bamboo blinds but a row of crude iron bars.

"Huh?"

As she pushed down the sense of dread creeping over her, her eyes darted around the chamber. There was a stone wall to her right. A stone wall to her left. A stone wall behind her. Laid out over the floor was the shabby straw mat she was lying on. The stone ceiling didn't let a single sliver of moonlight through, but there came the occasional drop of whatever substance had managed to seep into it.

"Is this...the dungeon?"

The dazed murmur of her voice sounded wrong to her ears. It was slightly too

deep to be her own.

She stared down at her hands. Their shape vaguely differed from how she remembered them, and she had no recollection of the bulky, heavy attire she was wearing. It was too dark to tell what color it was, but when she slid her fingers over the cloth, its tightly sewn threads felt hard to the touch. It was almost certainly goldwork.

This was an excessively extravagant garment.

Before this bit of information could lead her to an epiphany, light flooded her cell.

“I see you’re awake.”

It was the voice of whoever was holding the candlestick. A woman, apparently.

Squinting into the bright light, the girl watched as this woman drew closer, her shoes scraping against the floor. Upon seeing that the owner of the candle was someone she knew, she grasped the bars of her cell and leaned toward her, relieved.

“Oh, Tousetsu—”

Yet the woman interrupted her in a voice as cold as ice. “How *dare* you address me with such familiarity.”

The girl’s eyes went round. Her hands still gripping the iron bars, she stiffened, and Tousetsu—Reirin’s head court lady—stared down at her, narrowing her almond eyes into a glare.

“Because *you* pushed Lady Reirin from the Seventh Pagoda, she continues to suffer into the morning hours. You hurt the flower of our Maiden Court, and for that you shall pay with your life, Lady Shu Keigetsu.”

“Pardon?”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. With the bitter glare of her own court lady turned upon her, Reirin was left wide-eyed with shock.

Chapter 1:

Reirin Switches Bodies

“**I**...WHAT?” the accused murmured in disbelief.

Tousetsu gave a derisive snort at Reirin’s—no, “Shu Keigetsu’s” reaction. “Don’t play dumb with me. In a fit of irrational jealousy, you took advantage of the moment we were distracted by the shooting stars to push the helpless Lady Reirin from the pagoda. All those present heard you disparage her as an ‘accursed woman.’”

“I...” She *did* recall that.

Indeed, Reirin had heard Keigetsu yell as much as she closed in, her hair flying in all directions. Moments later, she’d felt the flash of the comet’s light burning her up from the inside out, and before she knew what was happening, she’d found herself crouching on the spot. And then, on the edge of her fading consciousness, she’d heard what sounded like “Reirin” screaming and something hitting the roof.

In other words...that was the moment Lady Keigetsu and I switched bodies. As unbelievable as it was, that was the only explanation she could come up with.

Her hands clutching the iron bars, Reirin thrust herself toward Tousetsu. “Um, I don’t know if you’ll believe me, but I’m—”

However, the moment she attempted to finish that sentence with “Reirin,” to her great dismay, she felt the air rush from her lungs. Again and again she tried to say her name, but each time, her voice vanished into thin air. Reirin was at a loss.

What’s going on?!

She tried to communicate that she wasn’t Shu Keigetsu, if nothing else, but her lips refused to form the name. And not just the name—any words that could have described her situation, like “switched places” or “different person,” failed to form a sound in her throat.

Drawing her own conclusions as to why Reirin kept opening and then closing her mouth, Tousetsu scowled in disgust. “Do you mean to tell me you meant her no harm? How laughable that you can’t even manage a decent excuse.”

It appeared that Tousetsu held “Shu Keigetsu” in the utmost contempt.

How do I tell her I’m Reirin?

Hit with a flash of inspiration, Reirin raised her voice. “Tousetsu! I know you like sweets. You’re especially fond of moon cakes. Red bean paste is your preferred filling. Horse mackerel is your favorite fish. You have a low tolerance for alcohol, which makes things hard when your position so often calls for social drinking with the bureaucrats. Isn’t that right?”

Her idea was to recite facts only the two of them would know. Surely Tousetsu, who was known for her intelligence and composure, would realize what was going on soon enough.

“You have one younger brother. His name is Kouyuu. The age difference is just right to make him the apple of your eye. Oh, I believe he was the same age as me! That’s why, not long after you first began to serve me in the Maiden Court, you asked me to think of you as an older sis—”

“Silence, you rotten witch,” Tousetsu interrupted her. Her voice was immeasurably darker than the one she’d been using only moments ago.

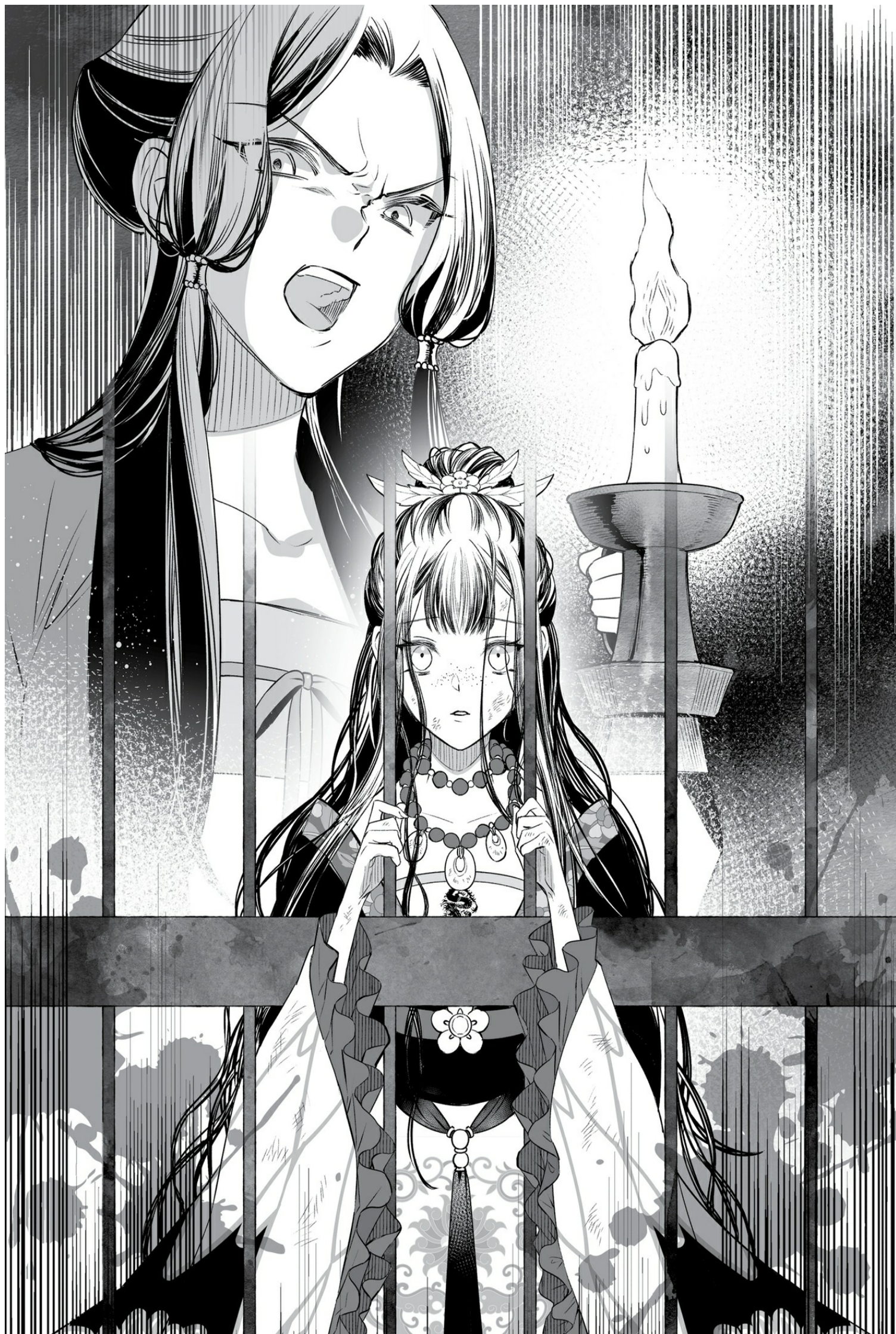
Reirin gulped. “Tousetsu?”

“I never want to hear you...an impudent sewer rat like *you*, without a scrap of beauty or talent or decency to your name, emulate Lady Reirin! Let me tell you something: I’ve already heard about how you snuck into her room and stole her diary a few days ago.”

Reirin was taken aback by her court lady’s harsh tone, but even more so by what she was saying. *I don’t even have a diary!*

Tousetsu continued to fume, heedless of Reirin’s consternation. “She came clean to us about your theft in spite of the awful fever racking her body. ‘I didn’t report it sooner so as not to worry you, but I fear Shu Keigetsu might use clues from my diary to hurt those close to me or perhaps even sway them to her side. It wouldn’t be right to keep quiet about it any longer,’ she said.”

At that, the court lady gave Reirin a look that could kill. “Did you think that if you read her diary and imitated her mannerisms, you could turn yourself into Lady Reirin?! Well, you were sorely mistaken!” she roared.



“What?!” Reirin was baffled.

But I am Reirin!

As ridiculous as it sounded, there was a good chance that “Reirin’s” body currently housed the soul of Shu Keigetsu. Her actions—that is, plotting to keep anyone from finding out that “Shu Keigetsu’s” true identity was Reirin herself—suggested no small amount of malice. In other words, this switch had been no freak accident, but something she had orchestrated in order to take Reirin’s place.

“For a grimy rat like yourself to even envy the lovely, wise, benevolent Lady Reirin, one who graced our land like a celestial maiden in the flesh, is the height of arrogance.”

“A celestial maiden?! Erm, I’d say that’s going a bit too—”

“You dare ridicule a soul as pure as Lady Reirin’s, you sewer rat?!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m a sewer rat!”

There was no understating the authority in Tousetsu’s tone—or rather, the intensity of her love for her Maiden. It was enough to make Reirin parrot back her insult in the heat of the moment.

What to do? Her loyalty is blinding her to her mistress’s predicament...

Given how rarely she showed emotion on her face, Reirin had taken Tousetsu for the levelheaded sort, but it seemed she was quite enamored of her mistress. Or perhaps it was Reirin’s frail constitution that led her to see the girl in such an idealized light.

“E-excuse me...”

“In accordance with the laws of the inner court, suspects like yourself are to undergo the Lion’s Judgment. Your victim, Lady Reirin, is to stand witness. Yet, in her own words, she has no desire to watch something so distasteful as the spatter of your foul blood... How sensitive and compassionate she is.”

“Are you sure that’s the appropriate reaction...? I mean, uh, nothing!”

“Consider this Lady Reirin’s mercy. You’re free to swallow it.”

While Reirin was still reeling from this heated display of loyalty, Tousetsu thrust a small pill before her. It didn't take much imagination to figure that it was poison.

"Um..."

"I've already spoken to the guards. The Lion's Judgment will begin within the hour. By the time this candle goes out, I implore you to reflect on your sins and bring your own life to an end."

Delivering that final line in her usual mild tone, Tousetsu removed the candle from its stand, handed it to Reirin between the gaps in the bars, and turned swiftly on her heel.

Having accepted the offered candle on reflex, Reirin furrowed her brow in bewilderment. "I'm to die for the crime of hurting myself?"

How ironic was that?

"Hee hee... Aha ha ha! Serves you right!"

That was when she heard a resounding burst of laughter.

"Huh?!"

Reirin lifted her head in surprise—but no, the voice had to have come from somewhere right beside her. She glanced around, almost disbelieving, and there in the flickering flame of the candle was none other than the smiling face of "Kou Reirin."

"Surprised? This is the art of the flame mirage. Fire is the faithful servant of our Shu clan. With enough concentration, any flame can manifest the image of the practitioner."

"The practitioner? Are you a cultivator who's mastered the mystic arts? No, before that..." She'd asked out of sheer surprise, but as she wet her lips, Reirin reconsidered her question for the girl reflected in the flames. "Are you...Lady Shu Keigetsu?"

"Yes, that's right. Though I've become 'Kou Reirin' now," Keigetsu answered without a moment's hesitation. She then twisted Reirin's face in a smirk. *"And you've become 'Shu Keigetsu,' the big bad villainess who tried to murder her."*

How are you liking the Maiden Court's dungeon? With all the rats and bugs crawling around, your average girl would lose her mind in a matter of hours."

"Why would you...?" Reirin murmured before she could stop herself.

The other girl responded with a snide raise of an eyebrow. *"To set things right."*

"To what?"

"You heard me. How is it fair for you to be blessed with everything? You were born the niece of the all-powerful empress, favored by His Highness, and beloved by the ladies of the court. And all the while, I suffer in—oh, I'm burning up! Everything hurts, for mercy's sake!"

Keigetsu ran a hand through her hair, frustrated, then loosened the collar of her garment. From the sound of it, Reirin's body was running a temperature.

"I have the kind but powerless Noble Consort Shu. Nasty court ladies. Looks nowhere near good enough to catch His Highness's eye. I'm sick of it. But that's when I came up with a wonderful solution."

She disentangled her hand from her hair, a sharp glint flashing in her eyes. The smug smile tugging at her lips gave her the look of a cat staring down a mouse.



“We just had to trade lives. I’d have you set the stage for me, and the moment you were sitting on top of the world, I’d take your place. Then you’d get the perfect taste of all the misfortune I’ve suffered.” The girl gave an utterly delighted chuckle. *“You don’t know what it’s like to be despised. To be belittled, to be mistreated. You’ve always had someone to protect you—to love you. I won’t stand for it!”*

Perhaps worried that someone might overhear, Keigetsu followed that outburst by lowering her voice to a whisper. *“I want to see you absolutely miserable. I want to watch as people insult you, hurl stones at you, and refuse to believe a word you say. Oh, and by the way, I’ve cast a spell that prevents the body you’re in from communicating anything related to our switch. I’ve also set things up so that ‘Shu Keigetsu’ stole ‘Kou Reirin’s’ diary. You’ll never be able to prove who you really are.”*

Oh, so that’s what was going on earlier, Reirin thought, satisfied with the explanation.

It seemed Keigetsu was quite skilled in the Daoist arts, and her weak-kneed demeanor belied her true cunning. Reirin’s feverish body, on the other hand, couldn’t handle the magic quite as well, and she began to wobble on her feet.

“Oh, give me a break! The word ‘delicate’ makes it sound so nice, but ‘weak’ is all this body really is. A few bruises and you’re running a fever? I can’t believe this.”

“Um... Why don’t you lie down? It’d be a good idea to cool your forehead and the skin near your largest arteries. To be more specific, your neck, underarms, and—”

“Shut up! Do you understand the position you’re in?” Keigetsu yelled back, shooting down Reirin’s concerned piece of advice. *“Guess what? You’re going to die soon. Here, I’ll let you in on a little something interesting: Your Lion’s Judgment is to be conducted by the merciless captain of the Eagle Eyes. You have no chance of survival. Even if you do take the poison I gave Tousetsu, any coward who resorts to suicide will have their body dragged to the ritual site and pelted with rocks. You’re going to die a miserable death, bathed in the scorn and ridicule of a crowd.”*

She carefully punctuated each and every word, doing her best to drive the point home.

“Goodbye, Kou Reirin. Spend your final moments living in fear of Death’s footsteps, surrounded by filthy rats.”

With one last parting shot, Keigetsu puckered her lips and blew out the flame. In the same moment, the candle Reirin was gazing at was likewise extinguished.

Left alone to stare at the wisps of smoke rising from the candle, Reirin fell silent for some time. “This is terrible,” she murmured eventually.

Since that had been her first time seeing anyone wield the mystic arts, the whole encounter almost felt like a dream. Nevertheless, she knew she had landed herself in a great deal of trouble.

“What could I have done to make Lady Keigetsu despise me so?”

Tears pricked her eyes with the realization that she had never been met with such hostility before. The guilt was so overwhelming, she thought she might faint.

Oh...? She blinked in sudden surprise. *But that means I’m still holding on to consciousness!*

It dawned on her that *thinking* she might faint paradoxically meant that she had yet to do so. Her arms flew into motion, touching and examining the various parts of her body.

“My knees aren’t shaking... My arms aren’t numb... I’m not out of breath... My pulse is around sixty!”

Clamping her hands over her mouth, she gave a muffled cry of joy.

This is incredible! I always used to faint if I was even a little bit careless!

Few outside her clan knew the truth, but Reirin was not of a somewhat weak constitution; she was of an *abnormally* weak constitution. Ever since she was a child, all it took to make her fall deathly ill were the most trivial of reasons: she was too hot, she was too cold, she was tired, she had gone outside... Though owing to her own tireless efforts, she had managed to recover before her condition ever got too serious over the past few years.

Keigetsu had yet to realize this herself, but it wasn't the fall from the pagoda that had caused "Kou Reirin's" body to run a fever. Neglecting those tireless efforts had simply allowed her predisposition to falling ill once every three days to rear its ugly head.

"What a healthy body! Why, I'm so jealous!"

Reirin gulped. For a moment there, she had nearly forgotten her circumstances and considered herself lucky to have traded places with Keigetsu.

No, bad Reirin! That body was my parents' gift to me. It's my duty to live with it until the day I die.

Furrowing her brow, she clasped her hands together and nodded sagely at her own advice. Frankly, there was a part of her that still wanted to give in to the temptation.

The racket she was making stirred a rat in the corner to life with a squeak. Almost on instinct, she clicked her tongue to get its attention, then tickled it with the tip of her finger when it had scurried close enough. One aspect of her tireless efforts had made her quite adept at taming rodents.

Well now.

As Reirin gazed down at the happily scampering rat, her eyes grown accustomed to the dark, she pondered her situation with a solemn expression. Keigetsu had told her to tremble in fear of Death's footsteps, surrounded by rats.

But what part of that is supposed to pose a challenge?

For Reirin, who kept rats of her own for herbal experiments and who slipped into critical condition each time she got sick, that was business as usual.

"Oh, I spy a bug! I'd better catch it to give Mr. Rat something to eat."

Kou Reirin had a reputation as a fragile, delicate lady of high standing, one who wouldn't so much as hurt a fly. Keigetsu had been under the impression that tossing her into the dungeon would drive her mad in no time, but that had been a grave miscalculation.

Reirin was anything but delicate. Having survived an astronomical number of

brushes with death, the girl had nerves of steel.

Chapter 2:

Reirin Faces Execution

SHIN-U STARED UP at the sky, disgruntled, and then heaved another weary sigh as he took in its dazzling blue hues. It was a sunny day without a cloud in sight. The perfect weather for an execution.

“The Lion’s Judgment, eh?” he muttered darkly, stroking the ceremonial sword that hung from his hip. That was the name of the ritual he was about to perform. The suspect was thrown into the same cage as a lion; if the beast spared them, they were innocent, and if it ate them, they were dead. It was a truly brutal and arbitrary trial.

The practice could be traced back to the legend of a sage who had once led the Kingdom of Ei, whose noble soul had inspired a beast to spare his life, but the contemporary version called for riling up a starving lion before sending it into the cage. There was a zero percent chance of survival. In practice, it was no different from an execution.

An enormous cage had been set up in the courtyard at the end of the cloister, and there the court ladies and eunuchs had formed an audience. Their eyes sparkled as though they were awaiting a show. Their choice of humble black garb was nothing more than a measure to prevent the spatter of the defendant’s blood from staining their clothes.

Shin-u heaved yet another sigh.

If only I could kill her in a single stroke and be done with it.

The sentiment wasn’t borne of mercy. He was simply loath to watch the inevitable sight of the woman shrieking, begging for her life, and dragging herself around the cage in disgrace. He’d stood witness to the Lion’s Judgment several times before, and not even grown men could keep themselves from screaming. Knowing that a girl—and *Keigetsu*, no less—was bound to raise all hell, he dreaded the spectacle to come.

I know enough to understand what a pain Shu Keigetsu is.

Just thinking back on all the trouble she'd brought to the Eagle Eyes' office was enough to make him grimace. Though the infamous Maiden of the Shu clan loved to adopt a sweet tone and cozy up to those in power, such as Gyoumei, Shin-u, or the four consorts, she always played the tyrant around the eunuchs and lower-ranked court ladies. Verbal abuse and insults were thrown around as a matter of course. On several occasions, she had accused her court ladies of invented wrongdoings in order to withhold their pay as "punishment," and she had bullied the eunuchs.

With her being a Maiden—one of the highest-ranked in the court—the Eagle Eyes could do little to keep her in check as long as she steered clear of more serious crimes like theft or murder. Now that she stood accused, the tempest of resentment that had long simmered in the Maiden Court would surge forth and descend upon her all at once. Normally, there would be time set aside for mercy offerings, where those who sympathized with the criminal were allowed to feed the beast—in other words, the more virtuous you were, the better your chances of escaping with your life—but nobody was going to do that for her.

Put simply, Shin-u's job for the day was to ask a hysterical woman a few questions as a formality, then retrieve whatever chunks of meat remained of her at the end of it.

"Captain of the Eagle Eyes" may sound like an impressive title, but in practice, I'm just another servant, he thought as he trudged over to the courtyard, his lips twisting in displeasure.

Being a prince with no claim to the throne was nothing but an inconvenience—both for himself and everyone else around him.

Shin-u knew full well why he had been handed such a bloody, tedious job. He was being tested. Could he devote himself to his role as a servant? Could he follow his orders and eliminate all enemies to the Imperial Court?

He was always being watched. Some looked at him with suspicion, wondering when he might turn traitor. Others feared him as a ruthless executioner. Most farcical of all were the women who gazed at him with unsightly lust, taken in by a beauty that ran only skin deep.

I'm sick of it.

Frankly, he found it all a hassle. His time at the inner court had taught him that the gorgeous compound housed nothing but a mass of malicious, self-interested, and egotistical desire. For that reason, Shin-u had never once cracked a smile since becoming the captain of the Eagle Eyes.

The moment he set foot in the arena, the gate in the back of the courtyard opened, and in came a giant lion the size of three grown men. Shin-u took the beast from its handlers and guided it carefully into the cage. With almost identical timing, Gyoumei, the empress, and the four consorts arrived on the scene and sat down upon the seats of honor.

All the Maidens except for Shu Keigetsu were seated one row behind them. In light of her fever, Kou Reirin had been given special permission to spread a rug under a garden pavilion a short distance away and watch from there. She looked even more helpless and disoriented than usual.

After casting a concerned glance Reirin's way, Gyoumei calmly announced, "We shall hereby begin the Lion's Judgment of Shu Keigetsu."

Once he had read out the charges brought against the accused, he asked if anyone wished to present a mercy offering. The crowd responded with an immediate "no."

A dark cloud settled over the gentle features of her guardian, Noble Consort Shu, but at length, she gave a deep bow and said, "If she is innocent, she won't be eaten. If she is guilty of the crime, then what happens to her is no longer any concern of the Shu clan. Either way, a mercy offering won't be necessary."

In other words, she didn't need a criminal for a relative. The audience raised their eyebrows and said nothing to her halting but otherwise inoffensive response.

"Bring Shu Keigetsu here," Gyoumei commanded, raising a hand. That was the signal to open the other gate.

Shin-u had been prepared for the girl to show up kicking and screaming, but when he turned around, he had to arch an eyebrow in disbelief. Shu Keigetsu had come quietly. It would have been no surprise for a sheltered lady like herself to have gone mad the moment she was thrown into the dungeon, yet she walked straight ahead, a light in her eyes and her gaze unfaltering. Perhaps

owing to her graceful gait, that ostentatious vermillion robe of hers looked almost a little sophisticated.

“Here I am.”

The way she came before the cage and bowed to the dignitaries was no less novel. The audience blinked in bewilderment. Even the villainess of the Maiden Court would turn docile on the chopping block, it seemed.

“O wicked Shu Keigetsu. You pushed my butterfly—Kou Reirin, a soul as pure as a celestial maiden—from the Seventh Pagoda. Although no one witnessed the moment you shoved her, your own shout, Reirin’s testimony, and both the lead-up and aftermath are evidence enough of your intent to kill. Do you plead guilty to your crimes?” Gyoumei asked, a chill in his voice.

“No,” she responded without hesitation, bowing to the prince. But then, for reasons unclear to anyone else, she frowned and added in a mumble, “That is to say, several parts of your account aren’t quite correct...including the words you used to describe me...”

“What? Not only do you deny your wrongdoing, but you profess yourself *righteous*?” Displeased with her answer, Gyoumei’s scowl grew even darker.

Flustered, Shu Keigetsu lifted her head and gave an even more incomprehensible reply. “Oh, no, that’s not what I meant! Though I suppose it *would* sound that way...”

Evidently at a loss for words, she opened and closed her mouth a few times with a look of frustration. The crowd had come so close to seeing her in a new light, but now their gazes turned cold as they thought, *Oh, she hasn’t changed.*

“No matter,” said Gyoumei with a disappointed sigh and shake of his head. “The truth will come out in the Lion’s Judgment. If you are genuinely innocent, the beast will refuse to devour you. Or, if you’d prefer, Reirin has kindly requested that I allow you the sword of the Eagle Eyes’ captain. If you get down on your knees and apologize, I shall permit you to take a blade through the heart in place of the trial.”

“Erm, both of those options seem rather extreme...”

Distress written across her face, Shu Keigetsu forewent proper etiquette and

threw herself toward Gyoumei.

“I beseech you; hear me out, if only a little. If you are truly the one praised as our benevolent ruler, my kindhearted cousin—”

“Silence,” the prince interjected, his expression filled with rage. His voice trembled, all his characteristic poise abandoned. “There’s only one person in all of creation allowed to call me that, and that’s Reirin. I was told you stole her diary. Did you think you could win my favor by mimicking my darling cousin, you conniving she-devil?!”

“Yes, sir! I’m a she-devil!”

So fierce was his tirade that Shu Keigetsu automatically nodded in agreement.

Still unable to contain his rage, Gyoumei gave Shin-u the signal. “Put her in the cage.”

The Lion’s Judgment had begun. Shin-u shoved the Maiden into the pen from behind. It appeared she was too terrified to resist.

“Oh no... I can’t believe I made the same mistake twice in such a short amount of time. Their affection is just a little too overbearing...”

No, it wasn’t fear. Pressing her hands to her forehead, she was merely reflecting on her blunder.

Having noticed the presence of an intruder, the lion growled and began its slow advance. When the girl continued to frown and mumble to herself in spite of the approaching beast, Shin-u was bemused enough to call out to her through the bars of the cage. “Hey. The Lion’s Judgment is underway.”

“Hm? Yes, so it would seem.”

Though she lifted her head, her response was nonchalant as could be. Shin-u stared at her, wondering if she had finally lost her mind, but her eyes were perfectly focused. Yet still she let the predicament pass over her like a gentle spring breeze.

He had to ask one more time. “Do you understand your situation? You’re locked in a cage with a starving beast.”

“Yes... If it tears into me with those fangs, I suppose I’ll die.”

“You *suppose*? That’s it?”



Was that all she had to say about it? Not that he'd been hoping for a better reaction, but it was unsettling to see her so calm.

What's going on? Was she always like this?

Even a master of the sword would be hard-pressed to keep his cool with such a savage beast closing in on him. Much like how a warlord who had survived countless brushes with death might calmly overlook the battlefield, or perhaps how a sage who had trekked through countless hells might attain a state of enlightenment, the woman before him did nothing but stand there, unfaltering.

"Does the thought of death not frighten you?"

"I'm used to it."

"What?"

He shot her another glance, curious how a Maiden sheltered deep within the court could say something like that. The look in her eyes grew a little distant as she matter-of-factly replied, "Until the moment one dies, one is still alive. Likewise, until the moment I'm devoured, it has yet to happen. To start feeling the pain before I've even been bitten would be nothing but a waste of strength."

Her argument sounded as logical as it did nonsensical.

The one thing Shin-u knew for sure was that she wasn't the least bit scared of this beast. Perhaps because her serenity did little to provoke its wrath, or perhaps because it regarded her tranquil bearing with caution, the lion did nothing but sniff at her sleeves, making no move to attack. Upon seeing this, Shin-u bought the story in the legend for the first time; maybe a self-possessed sage *would* have escaped the beast unscathed.

The spectators broke into confused whispers at this unexpected turn of events.

"Why, I've never seen the lion leave someone alone!"

"Does this mean Shu Keigetsu is innocent?"

"I suppose it's true that no one *saw* her do it."

“But what else could have happened?”

Most rankled by the buzz of the crowd was Gyoumei, who seethed with righteous indignation. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Captain, prod the beast with your sword.” He was commanding the guard to spur the lion into action.

“But, Your Highness, that would compromise the integrity of—”

“Captain. That was an order.” Gyoumei shot down Shin-u’s protest with finality. “That’s her punishment for mocking Reirin.”

As far as his half brother, Shin-u, was concerned, Gyoumei was no tyrant. On the contrary, he valued reason, cared for the weak, and was extolled as a great ruler-to-be. However, that was all the more reason he didn’t hesitate to punish those who would behave unreasonably or torment weak young girls without so much as an apology.

The crown prince’s orders were absolute. Shin-u glanced at the woman in the cage and saw that she remained as calm as ever. Then, without another word, he poked the beast in the side with the tip of his sword.

Never in his wildest dreams had he thought this trial would make him feel guilt for Shu Keigetsu.

Grr... Grrraaah!

The hitherto docile lion roared. Shrieks erupted from the crowd as it flung itself against the inside of the cage over and over, drool spilling from its open jaws.

It pounced at the girl. She had managed to keep still until that moment, but as the beast attempted to sink its teeth into her sleeves, she scrambled to pull her arm out of its reach.

“Y-you mustn’t!”

Had fear won out at last? Shin-u automatically averted his gaze.

Nooo! That’s where I’m keeping the remains of Mr. Rat!

The truth behind Reirin’s sudden panic, however, was that the sleeve of her robe was hiding the rat she’d met in the dungeon. She’d been playing with the rodent right before she was taken from her cell, and then it had accidentally

swallowed the poison from Tousetsu. She had completely forgotten that she'd dropped the poison in shock when she saw Keigetsu's flame magic. Blaming herself for its death, she'd tucked its corpse away in her sleeve, planning to bury it as soon as the opportunity arose.

"Calm down! I get it, it's instinct for you to want this!"

You're a relative of the cat, after all!

Backing away, Reirin made a desperate attempt to reason with the lion. "I understand that's the natural order of things, but I haven't had the time to move on! I mean, I'd like to atone in my own way!"

The crowd went wild at the sight of "Shu Keigetsu's" sudden, marked distress. Reirin, meanwhile, was in too much of a tizzy to notice.

"Um, I realize this might sound like an excuse, but it's for your own good! Eating this won't do you any favors!"

Stripped of her shoes, she felt the chill of the steel bars against her heels. There was nowhere left to run.

Grraaaah!

"Once you've gathered your wits, you'll see that the freshness and quality of this snack leave something to... Eek!"

Her attempts at diplomacy had failed; the starved, agitated beast sprang upon her. The tear of cloth echoed through the arena, followed by an even louder roar.

But when the same onlookers who had shut their eyes or averted their gazes at last shifted their attention back to the cage, their jaws dropped. The lion had swallowed the scraps it snatched up with a ferocious speed, only to slump to the ground a few moments later.

"What...?"

"Huh? The *lion* was the one to fall?"

While the audience around her was stunned into silence, the girl gasped and fell to her knees. "I tried to warn you! No...the responsibility is mine. I'm sorry."

She reached out to pet the beast. When she was sure that it had breathed its last, her shoulders slumped in grief.

“Uh... Is the lion...dead?”

Before long, the crowd broke out into confused whispers.

“Does this mean the trial is over?”

“Surely it must? One of the parties is dead.”

“Then does that mean Shu Keigetsu was innocent?”

There was no precedent for the accused outliving the beast in the Lion’s Judgment. No one was sure how to judge the outcome in this scenario.

Eventually, Shin-u twisted the key in the lock and came into the cage. “Hey, Shu Keigetsu. Can you stand? I need to check if the lion is dead. Out of the way.”

Keeping the tip of his sword pressed to the beast’s throat, he conducted a brief examination. “Poison, huh?” he muttered at last, then turned his blade on the girl instead. “Did you set this up?”

“No. It was a tragic accident.”

“An accident? How?”

“The problem was Mr. Rat, you see...”

Even with the blade of the dreaded executioner thrust before her, “Shu Keigetsu” did not flinch. When the crestfallen girl told him the truth of the situation, Shin-u was stunned.

“You hid one of the dungeon rats in your sleeve? To *bury* it?”

“Yes. It lost its life due to my own carelessness.”

She’d responded as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but had she always been the sort to demonstrate such responsibility and compassion?

“I never imagined that the poison would linger in its remains... I sincerely regret that my actions have taken the lives of two different animals today.”

The girl’s meek confession was enough to make the corner of Shin-u’s lips

twitch ever so slightly. “Heh...” For the first time in who knew how long, he felt the urge to laugh.

The court ladies found themselves captivated by the gorgeous captain’s never-before-seen smile, then turned their eyes to the heavens, fearing snow might start falling from the summer sky next.

Shin-u cleared his throat and swallowed his amusement. “If someone had fed the lion a mercy offering, it might have acted a little more rationally.”

Surely the irony wasn’t lost on some of the crowd. Between the women who had refused to placate the beast at their own relative’s execution and the so-called criminal who had mourned a filthy rat, the heavens had shown mercy upon the latter.

The guard stepped out from the cage, then kneeled on the spot and pronounced, “Your Imperial Highness, Prince Gyoumei! The death of the beast marks the end of the Lion’s Judgment. If the accused is eaten, they are guilty; if they are spared, they are innocent. In accordance with the sacred rules of this ritual, I hereby declare Shu Keigetsu to be cleared of suspicion!”

A stir swept through the courtyard.

Gyoumei fell silent for several moments, his brow furrowing in thought.

At last he said, “Acknowledged.”

The life-or-death nature of the trial made its verdict absolute. Not even Gyoumei could overturn it.

“No...!”

“Forgive me, Reirin. I swear I’ll protect you, no matter what it takes.”

Gyoumei’s face twisted into a tortured frown when he saw the Maiden lying under the pavilion go white as a sheet. He then turned his scowl upon the other girl, who had taken a hesitant step out of her cage.

“Shu Keigetsu. In recognition of your innocence, I shall permit your continued stay in the Maiden Court. But make no mistake. The only charge you’ve been cleared of is that of shoving Reirin over the balustrade. By no means have I pardoned your insults against her. Do bear that in mind.”

“Oh? But if I’m not mistaken, wasn’t spurring the captain to action meant to be my punishment for mocking her?” she murmured in bemusement, placing a hand to her cheek.

Evidently, she’d overheard their exchange.

The prince’s eyes widened a bit at this surprising show of insight. “Yes, well,” he said, clearing his throat. “I shall not pardon them *moving forward*. If I catch you disrespecting Reirin in any way, or witness another one of your brazen attempts to displace her, know that I will have your head at once.”

“Displace her? Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean that it infuriates me to see a woman of your ilk imitate Reirin’s mannerisms. Know your place as a villainess and conduct yourself accordingly,” he all but spat.

The girl opened and closed her mouth a few more times, but in the end, she gave up and nodded. “A ‘villainess,’ hm? Very well. Though I am an inept villainess, I shall endeavor to live up to the title.”

The listless droop of her body was almost reminiscent of a flower drenched in the rain. On Shu Keigetsu, whose face so rarely wore anything but a coy smile or an arrogant sneer, the meekness of her bearing was all the more pronounced.

Gyoumei sighed, the wind taken from his sails. With the consent of the empress and the four consorts, he declared the rite adjourned.

Well, well. Looks like the “cleanup” is going to be pretty easy, after all, Shin-u thought. Though he maintained his ironclad poker face, it was with a good deal of amusement that he watched the disappointed patrons leave, chattering among themselves all the while.

He shot a glance at the acquitted woman, but *she* didn’t appear too pleased with the outcome. She stood rooted to the spot, looking as miserable as ever.

However, by the time the courtyard had almost emptied out, she at last slapped her cheeks and snapped herself out of her daze. “Come on, a girl’s got to have backbone! I’ll just have to do what I can. Let’s do this with a bang!”

This was the situation that called for backbone, not the trial? Her choice of

rallying cry was no less bizarre.

“First of all... Mr. Lion? Mr. Rat? I’m truly sorry for what happened here today. Please accept my condolences and rest in peace.”

What’s more, the first thing she had to do was pray for the souls of the beast and the rodent. Her every action was a mystery—and an entertaining one, at that.

“Shu Keigetsu.” Before he knew it, he found himself calling out to her. “Were you always this sort of person?”

For reasons that escaped Shin-u, her eyes lit up at the question. “Oh! Do I seem different to you?!”

Leaning forward in excitement, she indulged in her frequent habit of opening and closing her mouth a few times, but eventually stopped and let her shoulders sag.

“I’m not the person I used to be. I’m afraid that’s all I can say about it.”

Had her execution motivated her to turn over a new leaf? If the average woman lost her mind in the dungeon, it followed that a near-death experience might inspire yet another to change her ways.

“Oh?” Shin-u shot back a noncommittal response.

Shu Keigetsu was haughty and talentless, an unappealing Maiden whose only skill lied in sucking up to her betters. And yet...

She’s an interesting one.

Gazing at this woman who, in the mass of malice, self-interest, and sycophancy known as the Maiden Court, had displayed not a single one of those sentiments, Shin-u gave a thoughtful stroke of his chin.

Chapter 3:

Reirin Moves to Paradise

JUST AS REIRIN was pondering her next move now that the Lion's Judgment was behind her, a young woman with striking auburn hair showed up and called out her name. "Lady Keigetsu." The look on her face was devoid of emotion.

A plain, pale pink robe... She must be a retainer of the Shu clan.

Court ladies were to dress in the color of whichever of the five clans they served. The higher their rank, the darker the shade of their robe, which meant this surly-faced girl in a drab, muted red garment had to be a low-ranking court lady in charge of the cooking and laundry. She had likely come to usher "Shu Keigetsu" back to her room, concerned that the Maiden had yet to show any signs of leaving the courtyard.

Or so Reirin had thought.

"By the orders of the Noble Consort, I am to help you move into your new room. I hope to have it ready for you by nightfall. Let us make haste."

Reirin blinked. That wasn't what she had expected to hear. "My new room?"

"Innocent or not, Consort Shu said she cannot offer you the same warm hospitality after all the trouble you've made for the inner court."

From that, she gathered that either her room had been downgraded or she was about to be put into solitary confinement.

"Erm..."

Each palace was sectioned off to keep the other clans out. Reirin was briefly unsure whether she ought to set foot inside the Shu Palace, but in the end, she gave a hesitant nod of her head.

"I suppose not. I appreciate your assistance."

Maidens spent the daylight hours honing their skills in the court, but come evening or days of rest, they were to stay in the chamber assigned to them in

their respective palaces. In other words, she had to take up residence in *one* of the palaces if she wanted a place to sleep. Under the circumstances, showing her face around the Kou clan's Palace of the Golden Qilin was likely to end in Tousetsu pelting her with poisoned dumplings and berating her as a sewer rat.

Perhaps I should start by explaining the situation to Noble Consort Shu.

Reirin's polite response earned her an incredulous stare, but it didn't take long for the court lady to shove those thoughts aside and begin leading the way out of the courtyard.

"Thank you very much. Um, may I ask your name?"

There was a short pause before she answered. "It's Leelee."

She was walking a few steps ahead, so all Reirin could see of her was her back. Even so, the low pitch of her voice—the tone of someone struggling to keep her emotions in check—spoke to an ineffable rancor.

"For a year, I've stayed by your side and put up with serving you, and you can't even remember who I am? I shouldn't be surprised," she added under her breath, like she couldn't help herself.

Reirin was kicking herself on the inside. This was no low-ranking court lady but Keigetsu's personal attendant—someone whose name she ought to have known. Still, Reirin found it curious that Leelee had been so quick to dismiss her blunder as a matter of course.

You could be a little more suspicious! Like, say, "You don't remember me?! You must be a fake!" Don't give up so fast!

As much as she wanted to grab the girl by the shoulders and give her an encouraging shake, she wasn't in a position to so much as say the name "Shu Keigetsu."

Hrk... Even if I can arrange a meeting with Noble Consort Shu, how am I to explain any of this to her?

Keigetsu hadn't said she couldn't say anything about their switch—she'd said she couldn't *communicate* anything about it. Back in her cell, Reirin had tried to write the characters of her name on her palm, but her fingers would freeze up

every time; thus, she had to assume that she couldn't write anything pertaining to their switch either.

I can't say anything, and I can't write anything... What's left? Butt charades, perhaps?

Reirin gave the idea some serious thought but ultimately decided against it. She couldn't see anyone having the patience to watch her shake her backside long enough to spell out her complicated situation. Besides, she had a feeling that Keigetsu's silencing spell would thwart even *that*.

The pair passed through the scarlet gates and continued down a path of dazzling white gravel. Glaring down at them from atop the entryway was a ferocious horse painted in a brilliant splash of color: the Vermillion Stallion. Befitting the rulers of the southern lands who had long revered the flame, the complex was resplendent in its entirety and rife with imposing imagery.

Immediately past the gates and under the largest of the eaved roofs was the chamber of the palace mistress, Noble Consort Shu. Leelee did not head that way, however, instead progressing silently down a crevice of a narrow path.

"Um, Leelee? Shouldn't we stop to greet Noble Consort Shu?"

"No. Consort Shu has instructed me to place you under immediate house arrest, lest you corrupt the court any further."

It was another way of saying she didn't want to see the face of a suspected criminal.

That's terrible. Here in the inner court, the consorts and their fledgling Maidens are supposed to be as close as a mother and child.

Reirin was shocked to hear what Keigetsu's guardian had said. No matter what charges were laid against *her*, for example, she was confident that Empress Kenshuu would at least be willing to hear her out. On the other hand, if she *did* prove to be guilty, the woman would go ahead and take the punishment into her own hands. Descendants of the Kou clan tended to be conscientious and treasure their strongest ties. If one of their own turned to crime, they'd take responsibility if it meant killing them with their own two hands.

Perhaps Consort Shu was a more coldhearted person than I thought.

That was her first thought, but it didn't match the image that would come to anyone's mind upon hearing the woman's name—that of her gentle smile and the soft droop of her eyes. What's more, not long after Reirin had first come to the Maiden Court, she had witnessed the Noble Consort reach her hand into the trees of the courtyard and take great care to relocate an insect. She couldn't imagine the woman who had gazed upon a mere bug with such compassion to be so cruel.

Then...I suppose that speaks to how much of an outsider Lady Keigetsu is here in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

The road ahead was going to be a treacherous one.

A handful of court ladies watched from the cloister as Reirin and Leelee crunched gravel beneath their feet. They gazed down upon the girls in disgust, hiding their faces behind their sleeves to conceal their sneers.

"Something stinks."

"You said it. It must be all the rats crawling around."

"Look, I spy two of them: a black one and a red one!"

No matter how much trouble she'd caused, they were going a little too far with their insults. These court ladies were dressed in cinnabar rust, a shade darker than Leelee's robe. Reirin was dismayed to be met with such blatant disdain by even the middle-ranked retainers.

Back in Reirin's home of the Palace of the Golden Qilin, even the highest-ranked court ladies clad in gamboge gold would engage her in friendly conversation. "Oh, Lady Reirin! It's been ten whole days since your last fever! I picked you some flowers to celebrate!" or "Please, Lady Reirin! The next time you faint, feel free to collapse on top of me! I have enough meat on my bones to break your fall!"

Hmm... It's so routine that I never paid it much mind, but now that I think about it, that's a little odd in its own right.

She hadn't noticed because she had nothing to compare it to, but in

hindsight, she suspected those girls were a tad on the overprotective side. Particularly the latter.

I take pride in my mental fortitude, but I fear it doesn't come across to others. No... That simply means I have to prove my independence beyond a shadow of doubt! As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I'd like to do. A life of complete self-reliance—now that's the dream!

Whether Reirin cared for their pampering or not, a single cough was all it took to get the Kou Palace court ladies flocking to her and crying, “Oh no! This is an emergency!” While she was glad for their loyalty, deep down, she vaguely—no, *strongly*—wished that she could be a little more independent.

As adherents of the god of earth, the Kou clan had been single-handedly responsible for cultivating the kingdom's land since ancient times. Having slowly and steadily worked their way through the rugged terrain, on the whole, those of the family line were persistent, hardworking, and eager to serve. They were the type who would rather love than be loved.

Being a member of that clan, not to mention a mainline descendant through whom the blood ran particularly thick, Reirin was a hot-blooded sort of girl. Unfortunately, her delicate looks, which were a rarity among the Kous, had put her firmly on the side of the “protected.”

As Reirin walked along, pondering the meaning of independence, all of a sudden the world around her grew darker and Leelee stopped in her tracks.

“This is your new room.”

When she saw where Leelee was pointing, Reirin's eyes grew wide. “Here?”

There, half buried under a large tree, stood a dilapidated storehouse that could very well have been called a ruin. The roof had just barely managed to hang on, but the walls had rotted and their plaster had torn, allowing a glimpse of the decaying wooden pillars inside. Neither a proper path nor garden, its yard was overrun with moss and weeds, and the heavy scent of grass in the air was almost stifling.

“It used to be a storehouse for provisions. Now that it's no longer in use, it's nothing but a breeding ground for insects and fungi.”

Whether the sunlight or the humidity was to blame, the speed at which the weeds grew made the place so difficult to maintain that no one cared to use it for storage anymore. The wall that stretched behind the shed marked the border with the Ran clan's Palace of the Indigo Fox. In short, this was the farthest fringe of the Shu Palace.

Exile. That was the most appropriate word to describe Reirin's—no, "Shu Keigetsu's" current predicament.

"This is where I'm meant to live?" As she glanced around at the weeds running rampant, Reirin's voice cracked and trembled ever so slightly. "*Here? Truly?*"

"Yeah. You heard me." Leelee's response came in a harsh tone.

"Leelee, what...?"

Reirin was taken aback, only for Leelee to whip around and pound her fist against the storehouse wall in rage.

"This is all *your* damn fault! We were consigned to this dump because you're an arrogant tyrant of a woman who was stupid enough to raise a hand against His Highness's butterfly!"

Her words were vulgar to the point that Reirin had never heard anyone speak this way before. Why, she almost sounded like a city dweller.

Discerning that the Maiden was more shocked by her vocabulary than what she was actually saying, Leelee lifted the corner of her mouth in a smirk. "Why so surprised? Haven't you always belittled me as the daughter of a lowly dancer? *You're* the one who said that no matter how hard I try to hide it, I could never erase the blood of my seductress mother. You and those blasted Shu court ladies insist on disparaging my best efforts, and now that I'm showing my true colors, you're scared?! Give me a break!"

Her narrowed eyes were an almost amber color. Red hair and pale eyes. The speech of a working-class girl. Her status as a court lady meant she had to be a member of one of the five clans, but chances were good that she was the child of a Shu and an immigrant dancer.

Reirin frowned as she pieced together why this girl wore a pale pink robe—

the color of the lowest of the low—despite working as a personal attendant.

Displeased with her interpretation of that reaction, the other girl punched the wall in another fit of anger. “Go ahead and sabotage yourself all you want, I don’t give a damn. But don’t drag me down with you! If I can just see the term of my service through, I’ll get a stipend... I’ve gotten this far telling myself that, enduring whatever came my way. And now I’m stuck looking after a criminal in this awful hovel?! You might as well have told me to drop dead!”

Along with her chambers, Noble Consort Shu must have taken the majority of court ladies from “Shu Keigetsu.” However, for all her charge’s flaws, leaving the Maiden without a single attendant would be seen as a neglect of her duties as consort. And so it was that Leelee, the most vulnerable of the court ladies, had been chosen as the unlucky victim.

She jabbed a finger at Reirin, an intense hue dancing in her still-young eyes. “Listen here! I’m not going to bother holding back anymore. I’ll tell you this now: I’m not planning to look after you. I still have the court ladies’ chambers to go back to. You’re the only one who’s going to live here. You can handle the weeding, the cleaning, and the cooking all on your own.”

“What?”

“For the record, I don’t think there’s a single court lady in this palace who would be willing to help you. After the hell you’ve put us through, I bet everyone’s jumping for joy to see how far you’ve fallen.”

Leelee exhaled a deep breath to pull herself together, then turned on her heel. “I’ll be on my way, then. Oh, right—and thanks to you killing that beast, the Maiden Court has been closed for seven days for a purification rite. You’re confined to this place for the duration. After the exorcism comes the Ghost Festival, but Consort Shu said you don’t have to bother attending. Do you get what that means? She wants you to stay here and keep your head down. You’ve got nothing but time, so hey, sit back and make yourself at home.”

She took one last parting shot and left. Reirin watched her tiny back disappear into the distance, then turned back to the storehouse.

“I’m to live here?” she eventually murmured. “In this wonderful place?!”

The hands she had reflexively clasped to her chest were quivering. Not in despair but in joy.

Indeed. This whole time, she had been overwhelmed by the “good fortune” that had fallen into her lap.

“A whole field of grass!”

Reirin broke into a run, plunging her outstretched hands into the thick green. It rustled through her fingers and felt coarse to the touch. What fun it was going to be to pluck! She hadn’t expected she’d be granted an opportunity to put “Shu Keigetsu’s” stamina to the test so soon.

“Rich soil!”

Next, she pushed the grass apart and touched the earth. As one could guess from the number of plants it sustained, the moist, damp soil had all the fertility of a mother.

“And most of all...freedom!”

Lastly, she cast a glance behind her. There was no longer a soul to be seen on the trail. All that remained was the dense greenery and a dwelling that guaranteed complete privacy. She had been given a staggering abundance of free time, during which she was subject to no scrutiny whatsoever.

Gosh! Aaaah! Do I really get to stay here?! I can grow herbs, experiment, and sleep all I want! I get to live without anyone worrying about how much I’m eating, inspecting my complexion, or rushing to my side the moment I cough! I can’t believe it!

The Maiden slapped her hands over her mouth and bounced up and down on the spot.

“Wait... There’s no reason to keep my voice down now!” she shouted, pulling her hands away with the realization.

Reirin was a teenage girl. She went through the same emotional ups and downs as anyone else, but she was accustomed to keeping a lid on those feelings. Raising her voice would only make her court ladies worry, and she ran the risk of fainting if she got too worked up.

But now that she inhabited a healthy body and a secluded environment?

“I don’t have to hold back anymore...”

Reirin heaved a happy sigh. She was overjoyed to be able to spend her time however she wanted—and, most importantly of all, to not upset anyone else in doing so.

“Oh, this won’t do! Lady Keigetsu switched our bodies because she hates me. To take such pleasure in the circumstances would ruin all her plans.”

At her core, Reirin couldn’t stand letting people down. She gave a solemn shake of her head, the thought snapping her out of her reverie. But not a moment later, she put a hand to her cheek in rapture, dazzled by the untamed nature before her.

“Still... Wow. This garden is all mine... Hee hee hee!”

The Kou clan was the bloodline of earth. They were a people who flourished in adversity, proud to stand on their own two feet. Though she kept telling herself this wasn’t the time or place, Reirin couldn’t see the landscape before her as anything but a glittering chest of treasure.

Shin-u frowned. The trail grew dimmer and dimmer the farther he went.

This is quite the gloomy place to find in the palace of the Shu clan, those devotees of the burning flame.

As he looked out over the yard, which grew more unkempt the more he distanced himself from Noble Consort Shu’s chambers, his eyes narrowed. He was currently performing an audit of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion alongside his most trusted eunuch, Bunkou.

The Lion’s Judgment was an impartial trial, and its verdict was absolute. Now that Shu Keigetsu had been deemed innocent, she was to receive the same treatment as any other Maiden; to mete out vigilante justice would be out of the question. As the man in charge of enforcing discipline in the inner court, Shin-u had paid the palace a visit to ensure she hadn’t fallen victim to any unwarranted sanctions.

“You shouldn’t have anything to worry about. Noble Consort Shu has a reputation for being the kindest and most graceful of the four consorts,” his companion said. “The fact that she took Shu Keigetsu as her Maiden in the first place says it all! So what do you say, Captain? How about we stop flaunting our Eagle’s crests to encroach on a consort’s palace?”

By no means were the eunuchs and the consorts always on good terms. One minute they would form an alliance, the next they would jump on the slightest of mistakes to sabotage one another. Among those four consorts, Consort Shu was one of the moderates. Bunkou’s whining was for fear of picking a fight with one of the only higher-ups who played nice with his kind.

“That ‘grace’ might translate to weak leadership. Whether she agrees with their actions or not, there’s a chance her court ladies have taken matters into their own hands.”

“We can cross that bridge when we come to it! Since when were you this passionate about your job, Captain? Hurry up and go back to your old misanthropic, apathetic, and cutthroat self!”

“Oho. So *that’s* what you think of me?”

“See? See that way you’re looking at me like a piece of trash? That’s exactly what I’m talking about! Now turn that attitude on your duties, I’m begging you!”

Shin-u shot Bunkou an icy glare, but the petite eunuch only put on a show of tears; he didn’t take a word of it back. Bunkou may have been a jokester who liked to take the easy way out, but he also happened to be clever and capable. Shin-u dismissed his antics with a sigh, turning back to the road ahead.

Gaps began to form in the gravel, and soon weeds threatened to overrun the path entirely. As he proceeded down the almost impenetrably narrow trail, trapped by wild grass on either side, at last an exceptionally dense cluster of trees and a storehouse with its plaster peeling away burst into view.

“They really chased a Maiden off to a place like *this*?”

“The court ladies said as much when we flashed them our crests, so it has to be true. Hmm... Either it’s a ploy to put her in such dire circumstances that she

wins back the sympathy of the court, or it's the court ladies acting on their known hatred of Shu Keigetsu—that is, the girls saw their prey was weak and bared their fangs all at once.”

“Whatever the case, this is overkill.”

There was more light than in her dungeon cell, but the building was all but crumbling. When he noticed an insect wriggling over the moist soil near his shoe, Shin-u reflexively crushed it under his foot.

Wild grass and bugs. Judging by the revolting color of the walls, there was probably some sort of mold growing too. It was certainly no place for a noblewoman to live.

Near the storehouse, a girl—one of the court ladies, Shin-u assumed—was plucking weeds with her back turned to the visitors, presumably in preparation for Shu Keigetsu's arrival. From the looks of it, she was the only attendant around. The sight of her sitting alone in the grass, occasionally wiping her forehead as beads of sweat trickled down her slim back, was enough to make even the notoriously cold-blooded Shin-u frown.

“Shu Keigetsu isn't a criminal. And no law-abiding person should have to live somewhere like this.”

“Hrm.” Bunkou regarded Shin-u's show of pity with a quirk of his lips and a shrug of his shoulders. “You're quite sympathetic to Shu Keigetsu's plight, Captain. But really, what did you expect?”

“Excuse me?”

“The only thing I feel watching this is irritation.” There was a chill in Bunkou's foxlike slits of eyes. “Shu Keigetsu may have been acquitted of pushing Lady Reirin from the pagoda, but that doesn't excuse the rest of her misdeeds. She's a foolish, haughty woman who never hesitates to mistreat her lessers. We eunuchs must never raise a hand against a Maiden, and I can't tell you how many times she's abused that absurd law to torment my colleagues, framing them for crimes or doling out punishments,” he spat, then pointed to the girl weeding the garden.

“Even now, she's forcing that girl to pay the price for her own stupidity. She

was supposed to be sentenced to house arrest, and where is she? Probably back in her old room, throwing a fit and refusing to leave. I'd be willing to bet on that."

Compared to Shin-u, who had only been working there for six months and held the position of captain of the Eagle Eyes, the long-serving common eunuch had considerably more grievances against Shu Keigetsu.

However, his last few words of harsh advice would soon disappear on the tip of his tongue.

"Just leave her be. So what if she's getting pushed around? She brought it on herself. If you go looking for her, odds are she'll resort to her usual sweet talk and you'll never be able to get rid of—"

"My, if it isn't the captain! And Master Bunkou too?"

The girl who had been plucking grass turned around, bowing to the pair with a smile.

"It's a pleasure to see you," she said. "How may I help you today?"

Both Shin-u and Bunkou went wide-eyed when they saw her face.

"Shu Keigetsu?!"

"Huh? No..." Upon hearing her name, she opened and closed her mouth a few times, then gave a noncommittal nod. "I mean, ah, yes...?"

Her face was lightly freckled, and her eyes turned up at the corners. The scarf tied over her head like a peasant notwithstanding, she looked like "Shu Keigetsu" from every angle. The pair couldn't hide their shock at the revelation.

"What...are you doing here?" Bunkou asked.

"Hm? Weeding, as you can see."

"Weeding?" She'd said it so nonchalantly that he couldn't help but parrot the word.

When she noticed the dubious looks on the guards' faces, she threw up her hands and rushed to make excuses. "I was told I'd be living here, so I thought I'd do some maintenance to make it a more comfortable home!"

“What happened to your attendant?” Shin-u asked in a low voice.

“Erm... She’s out running an errand,” she replied, averting her gaze ever so slightly. Just as he’d suspected, it was safe to say her court ladies had all abandoned her.

“Shu Keigetsu. Do you have something you’d like to tell me?”

“Huh?”

The Eagle Eyes were the enforcers of the inner court. If Shu Keigetsu had indeed been unjustly penalized, *she* was now in a position to bring a case against the Shu clan. Shin-u prompted her to speak up, but for reasons that escaped him, all she did was press a hand to her cheek in a fluster.

“S-something I’d like to tell you? Well, I suppose there is...but I’d hate to waste this garden, and there’s so much weeding to be done... I know! It won’t be long before nightfall, so why don’t we leave that for another day?”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“Oh... Um, I’d hate to bother the two of you when you’re so busy, that’s what I meant! J-just look at how I’m dressed! I’d rather save our chat for a later date, when I can offer you both a cup of tea!”

“Tea?!”

Even Bunkou was speechless. The captain of the Eagle Eyes was one thing, but the only Maiden who would ever be caught serving tea to one of the eunuchs was Kou Reirin, the girl hailed as a celestial maiden in human form. He had never dreamed he’d hear those words from the Maiden Court’s notorious villainess, Shu Keigetsu.

“So you see, I’d appreciate it if you could give me another day...or perhaps a few months...no, a few days to get back to you! Would that be all right?”

“Sure.”

Shin-u was pretty sure he’d heard her slip a different unit of time in there, but the pleading look on her face compelled him to nod his head nonetheless.

From an outsider’s perspective, she was in a horrible situation—exiled to a ruin of a house and forsaken by her retainers—but if she didn’t want help, the

captain had no reason to act.

“Well then! I’m sure you two have lots to do, so I apologize for keeping you so long. I’ll leave you to—”

“Hey.” Shin-u interrupted the girl’s attempt to rush the conversation to an end.

She blinked. “Yes?”

Shin-u and Bunkou exchanged glances. Shu Keigetsu was known for sucking up to anyone in power and taking every opportunity to be her own most vocal advocate. For *her* to send the captain of Eagle Eyes packing after he’d gone out of his way to visit her was beyond staggering.

“Uh... Ahem! Is there anything we can get for you?”

“What?” She tilted her head to one side in surprise, her fair cheeks smeared in mud. “Oh, I don’t know. Asking for your help would take all the fun out of it.”

“The *fun*?”

Met with a skeptical frown, she gave a firm shake of her head. “Apologies, I misspoke. I meant to say that I couldn’t bear to trouble you so.”

The guards traded looks again; there was yet another noble sentiment that had no business coming from Shu Keigetsu’s mouth.

“However... If I may be so bold as to take you up on your kind offer...”

At last, she shyly ventured a request. The moment she broke out the puppy-dog eyes, Bunkou shot Shin-u a look as if to say, *See, I told you so*. Of course, her demure behavior had all been an act. Now that she’d whittled down their defenses, no doubt she was planning to ask for court ladies, money, or perhaps a good word on her behalf to Noble Consort Shu.

“Could I ask for some salt?”

“Salt?”

“Yes. I should be fortunate enough to procure rainwater and potatoes on my own, but I’m afraid I can’t distill salt overnight.”

Now it was Shin-u’s turn to be rendered speechless. Just what was this

epitome of tyranny and laziness standing before him planning to do?

“Even criminals in exile are afforded the basic necessities of salt, oil, kindling, and water,” Bunkou mumbled in reply. “I can’t imagine that an innocent woman, let alone a Maiden, wouldn’t be entitled to the same.”

The girl’s hands flew to her mouth in surprise. “What?! Is it really as simple as that?”

Even an exile’s living conditions counted as “simple,” by her standards. Bunkou turned his head and whispered to Shin-u, “Are we *sure* this is Shu Keigetsu?”

“I’ve been wondering that all morning,” the captain readily agreed. Then, the look in his eyes softened a touch. “Doesn’t her serene, modest demeanor almost remind you of Kou Reirin?”

“How could you suggest that with a straight face?! His Highness’s butterfly—the delicate, graceful Kou Reirin—would never think to do something so uncultured as salt-making!”

Shin-u had managed to cut right to the heart of the matter, but Bunkou’s immense fondness for Reirin led him to dismiss the idea out of hand. When it came down to it, neither could Shin-u imagine the fragile, mild-mannered butterfly being quite this forward, so he backed down without a fight.

“I guess not. She did tell me she wasn’t the person she used to be. If I had to assume, either she lost her mind down in the dungeon, or she decided to turn over a new leaf.”

“Our dungeon must possess powers untold,” the eunuch muttered, casting a timorous glance toward the headscarf-wearing woman.

Shin-u couldn’t help but curl his lip to see his wisecracking subordinate so thoroughly disarmed.

Whenever I’m around this version of Shu Keigetsu, I never cease to be entertained. I wonder why?

For once, he managed to get in a shot at his chatterbox of a sidekick. “Well, Bunkou? You heard our gardening Maiden. As the loser of our bet, I leave the

task of fetching her salt, oil, water, and kindling to you.”

Leelee was furious.

Damn it. Damn it! Damn it all!

Her anger was justified. After all, she’d spent the last hour bowing and scraping just to get a single basket of food.

“Please, O benevolent matron! I can handle all the cooking myself. I won’t ask you to do more than fill this basket with enough food for me and Lady Keigetsu! That’s a mere two mouths to feed!”

“Two? Come now, Leelee. We’re talking about that disgrace to the Shu name who landed herself in the Lion’s Judgment. Maiden or not, I wouldn’t count her as a ‘mouth to feed.’ One share is all I have to give you. But a retainer wouldn’t dream of eating while her mistress goes hungry, now would she? Then the only solution is to withhold your rations altogether.”

“Only solution,” my ass!

For an hour now, the elderly court lady in charge of serving the meals, known as the culinary matron, had shrugged off Leelee’s pleas and refused her even a scrap of food. As a victim of Shu Keigetsu’s bullying and verbal abuse, the woman was yet another name on the list of people who had it in for the Maiden.

Unfortunately, she also happened to dislike Leelee, who had the blood of a foreign dancer running through her veins. It was clear from the glint of disdain in her eyes that when it came down to it, she had as little desire to feed the redhead as she did Keigetsu herself.

Blast it! I knew this would happen the moment they sent me off with that woman! Keeping her head bowed, Leelee clenched her teeth.

The harassment had begun on her very first day working in the Maiden Court. She *should* have received the cinnabar rust robe of a middle-ranked court lady, but the uniform tossed her way had been pale pink in color. That wasn’t all—it had been accompanied by insults.

“Higher-ranking court ladies are expected to deal with bureaucrats outside the inner court every now and then. How could we represent the Shu clan with the daughter of a dancer who would bed a man on sight, not to mention a foreigner with a tenuous grasp of our tongue?”

My mother was no harlot! She was a bona fide dancer, a master of her art!

Leelee’s mother had been a member of a traveling troupe that found their way to the Kingdom of Ei, the most prosperous nation on the continent. She excelled at the Sogdian Whirl, and the gorgeous sight of her dancing like a butterfly through the air had won her the heart of a man from the Shu clan.

However, a foreigner would never be allowed to marry into one of the five clans, who prized their pedigrees above all else; instead, she had been afforded an estate in the downtown area as his mistress. Dissatisfied nevertheless, his legal wife had tormented her until she was driven to an early grave.

Though Leelee’s father had mourned her death, his wife had refused to let him adopt Leelee into the main family, and as a result, she had been sent to the Maiden Court to serve as one of the Shu clan’s court ladies.

Her estate in the city had been taken from her. If she served her full three-year term, however, she would be provided food, shelter, and pay for the duration. For the sake of her own survival, Leelee had made up her mind to go work at the Maiden Court.

And how had that worked out for her?

The Shu clan was full of intense personalities. Though Noble Consort Shu was known for her grace, that virtue also manifested as spinelessness, and she did nothing to condemn the bullying rampant in the palace. The Maiden was arrogant, and her court ladies were bossy, so the girls were constantly looking for easy prey to keep the target off their own backs. In the end, Leelee became their victim.

I’d never sell my chastity! I don’t even know how to seduce a man! I’m a proud citizen of Ei and a full-fledged court lady!

Hard worker that she was, Leelee had spared no effort to prepare for her service. With the physical prowess she’d inherited from her mother, she had

learned the proper ways to carry herself in no time, and she'd read the books her father had given her to familiarize herself with the Five Classics.

And yet, one look at Leelee's red hair and overdeveloped breasts for her age was all it had taken for the women of the Shu Palace to deride her as a girl whose only talent lay in seducing men.

I hate it...

Leelee knew she was surrounded by enemies. The place was crawling with nothing but scum who loved to pick on the weak and mock anyone who deviated from the norm.

But what matters right now is that I get fed.

Having led a frugal life in the city, Leelee knew full well that sustenance was more important than her pride. Despite the shots she'd taken at Keigetsu, the truth was that not a single court lady in the palace would be willing to share food or a roof with her. If she couldn't get these rations, the one to starve for it wouldn't be Keigetsu the Maiden—it would be Leelee herself.

Alas, her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. After all that, the culinary matron said, "I have to start the preparations for dinner," and left. Leelee went so far as to cling to her skirt, but the woman violently shook her off.

"Damn it!" Leelee muttered to herself, left alone in the cloister.

She couldn't count on any charity from the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. Her only option was to visit one of the other palaces and beg for their mercy. Taking its proximity and the character of its residents into account, the Palace of the Golden Qilin was her preferred place to start, but she doubted that anyone from the Kou clan would offer aid to a Shu court lady under the circumstances. That left the Ran clan's Palace of the Indigo Fox to the east.

In order to get to another clan's palace, one had to pass through the Maiden Court at their center. Leelee took off in that direction, brainstorming how to sneak into residences that were essentially off-limits to the other clans.

Just as the roof of the Maiden Court had come into view, someone called out to her from behind. "You there."

When she turned around, she saw a woman in an ivory silk robe.

Ivory silk... She's a high-ranking court lady of the Kin clan! What does she want with me?

Leelee couldn't tell who she was with her face hidden behind her round fan, but having deduced the woman's rank from the color of her uniform, she knelt down on the spot.

"How may I help you, honored Ivory Silk?"

In the event one didn't know a court lady's name, it was custom to refer to the color they wore as if it were their formal title.

The ivory-clad woman flashed a smirk from behind her fan. "Night is soon to fall, so I shall come straight to the point. O pitiful Pale Pink, would you care to become a retainer of the Kin clan?"

"What?"

That offer was the last thing she'd been expecting to hear.

Leelee was too shocked to speak. Inferring the reason for her silence, the other woman started in on her explanation. "I've heard whispers of the punishment dealt to Shu Keigetsu. She's dragged you down with her, has she not? It's not as though you *chose* to be born the daughter of a dancer... You poor thing. My Maiden, the wise Lady Kin Seika, is heartbroken for you."

As angered as she was to hear this woman disparage her mother's profession, Leelee wanted to know what her proposal entailed. When she said nothing in response, the Kin woman smoothly went on, "Thus, we shall grant you a silver ermine robe on one condition. You have no particular allegiance to the Shu clan, correct?"

"Silver ermine?!" That was the color worn by middle-ranked Kin court ladies. Leelee's eyes widened at this once-in-a-lifetime deal. However, first and foremost concerned with the catch, she carefully broached the question: "May I ask the condition?"

"It's quite simple, really. All you have to do is torment your mistress, Shu Keigetsu."

“What?”

Leelee furrowed her brow, taken by surprise yet again. Why would a member of another clan be so eager to avenge Kou Reirin?

When she saw the dubious look on the redhead’s face, the ivory-clad court lady sniffed in disdain for her slow-witted conversation partner. “You see,” she said in a voice sweet as honey, “Lady Kou Reirin is the prince’s butterfly. Even a child could see how much His Highness favors her. Only the most thoughtless of fools would lash out in a fit of jealousy the way your mistress did. The surest way into the prince’s good graces is quite the opposite: to bend the knee and swear fealty to her.”

In other words, by cracking down on Shu Keigetsu, the Kin clan would set themselves up as Reirin’s benefactors.

As the character for “gold” in their name suggested, the Kin clan had been Ei’s sole manufacturer of gold coin since ancient times, and in doing so had established themselves as a cornerstone of the kingdom’s economy. Befitting a group of merchants at heart, the majority preferred to conduct themselves in an intelligent and pragmatic manner. Though any woman would pine for the smart, strong, and masculine Gyoumei, it was no wonder that the Maiden of the Kin clan had made the calculated decision to set her sights on the second seat instead.

“Not only are we forbidden to enter another clan’s palace, but the Maiden Court is closed for the purification rite for the next seven days. For the time being, we must leave it to one of her own clan to put Shu Keigetsu in her place.” The woman in ivory silk giggled behind her fan. “But when it comes out that *we* were the ones to orchestrate her suffering, imagine how chagrined the women of the Shu clan will be—and the rest of the clans, knowing that we beat them to the punch.”

“If we go too far in punishing her, won’t we get in trouble with the Eagle Eyes?”

“It’s a little late to be saying that after *your* people chased her off to a ruin. Worry not. A small sum of money is all it takes to make the enforcers look the other way.” Her tone was confident.

The woman pulled her ornamental hairpin free and thrust it before Leelee. Pearls lined a base made of silver. With thought to the clan's signature element, it was the perfect design for a Kin woman.

"I am Gayou of the Kin clan. Starting tomorrow, I shall give you a reward each time you meet me here and report on your dealings with Shu Keigetsu. After seven days, you will be granted your silver ermine robe."

Leelee stared down at the hairpin, still mulling this offer over. Seeing this, the woman said, "Perhaps you'd prefer this." She then took a small burlap sack from her sleeve.

Inside was almost two cups of rice. It was a high-end product, polished to enough of a shine to give the ivory silk robe a run for its money.

The woman gave a scathing laugh when she saw Leelee gulp, then slipped her hairpin into the bag and pressed the whole package into the girl's hand.

"I'll prepare double the amount for tomorrow. Interested?"

"Yes." There was a slight hesitation, but in the end, Leelee accepted her offer.

The woman smiled, satisfied, and turned swiftly on her heel.

As she watched Gayou disappear into the shadows of the Maiden Court, Leelee tightened her grip on the small bag in her hand.

I'm not doing anything wrong.

This was a matter of survival.

Besides, most of the Shu clan was happy to torment Shu Keigetsu without her asking. Leelee had already renounced her duties as an attendant. All she had to do was mention that to another clan's court lady once per day, like making a round of small talk. Just that, and she could escape the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion and get her hands on a silver ermine robe.

Leelee took a deep breath to clear her mind, then turned back the way she had come. The sun would be setting soon. She had to cook the rice before then.

Knowing how to start a fire puts me in a better position than most. I bet a certain someone is crying her eyes out as we speak, drowning in weeds and bugs.

Her lips twisted into a smirk as she considered the irony of it all. Come to think of it, the Maiden had once thrown her out into the garden for the simple reason that she didn't like the look on her face.

This was Keigetsu's just deserts. *Once I've cooked the rice*, Leelee decided, *I'll eat it right in front of her face*. If the girl rubbed her forehead in the dirt and apologized, she *might* be generous enough to let her have a bite.

"Heh heh... I'm going to make her pay for the hell she's put me through."

It was with this mindset that she bravely ventured back to the storehouse where Keigetsu awaited her.

"Oh, hello, Leelee! You came back!"

However, all her plans fell apart the second she stepped onto the grounds. The very woman who was supposed to be despairing amid weeds and a rundown shack had called out to her, pulling off her headscarf with a smile.

"Huh?"

"Great timing! I just finished frying the potatoes. I stir-fried some rapeseed shoots while I was at it! Come, let's eat while it's hot!"

"*Huh?!*"

How on earth had Shu Keigetsu, who by all accounts should have been on the floor bawling, cooked such a lavish meal?

"Oh! And look at this! I'm halfway done fixing up the garden!"

What's more, she had weeded her way through half the heretofore unruly yard. Not only that—she had moved the stray branches aside, sorted them according to their thickness, and formed the soil into ridges here and there.

The woman standing before Leelee puffed up with pride, grabbed her court lady by the hand, and led her over to the rows of ridges.

"It was a mess of all sorts of greens and fruits, so I replanted them by type. From left to right, we have the potatoes, the chives, the gourds, and the rapeseed plants—"

"H-hold on!" Leelee shook herself free of the Maiden's grip. "Slow down!"

What's going on here?!"

"Huh?"

"How did you get potatoes and gourds from this overgrown wasteland?! What, did you use the mystic arts?!"

The girl only giggled, amused at the suggestion. "Leelee, you silly! I don't know how to use magic."

Leelee had never heard that voice used for anything but squalling or berating others; she was taken aback to hear it make such a dainty laugh, one that exuded elegance.

"It was a wonderful stroke of luck, that's all. This used to be a storehouse, correct? The food left abandoned here sprouted with the help of the sunlight and humidity, unbeknownst to everyone else."

"What?!"

"The tenacity of life never ceases to amaze... This place serves as the border with the Ran clan, whose element is wood. Perhaps it's rife with a qi that nurtures plants. This really is some sort of paradise."

The girl nodded at her own words, awed, and then bent down to give the soil a loving pat, heedless of how it dirtied the hem of her clothes.

Leelee was stunned. "You can't be serious. Everyone knows this place is overrun with bugs and horrifying fungi!"

"Fungi! I forgot to mention that! The smut fungus has done such magnificent work here!"

Her face lit up, and she ran over to one of the dampest, muddiest spots she could find. When she came back, she was holding a stalk of grass with an unusually large stem in her hand.

"Take a look at this! The wild rice was infested with smut! It's still edible, *and* it can be used for eyebrow paint. Ooh, I know! Why don't I go ahead and stir fry these too?"

Leelee didn't know this, but infecting the seedlings of certain grasses with smut fungus turned them into a vegetable with the texture of a bamboo shoot.

Though she hailed from the city and knew how to fend for herself, she'd never tried her hand at growing vegetables before.

"Wh...wh...wha..."

"Oh, how blessed I am for all these opportunities to put my book learning into practice! So *this* is the reward of a good challenge... Praise be to my never-ending energy!"

The girl stared down at her own arms in rapt fascination, those eyes always alight with cajolery now sparkling with joy.

Abruptly snapping back to her senses, she shouted, "The potatoes!" and whirled to face Leelee again. "Come, our food's going to get cold! Let's start with the fried potatoes. I've always dreamed of stuffing myself with a dish loaded with oil and sprinkled with more salt than common sense should allow, undeterred by the threat of heartburn! Go on, Leelee! Join me in making this dream come true!"

The Maiden held out a hand, brimming with confidence, but Leelee frankly had no idea how to react.

"How did you even *get* salt and oil?"

"A very generous Eagle Eye brought me everything I needed, including cookware. I hadn't been planning to ask for salt, actually. I figured that if the need arose, I could season the food with tears to give it a saltier taste. But I did want to sprinkle a generous helping, so I was right to take him up on his offer!"

Seasoning her cooking with her own tears? Leelee was having so much trouble following her bizarre train of thought that she wanted to scream. She couldn't believe that the girl standing before her was *the* Shu Keigetsu.

What's wrong with her? She's like a completely different person.

Had she been possessed by a vengeful ghost, or had she gone insane? Leelee couldn't imagine an evil apparition this animated, so it was probably the latter. She must have lost her mind when she was locked up in the dungeon; that'd be enough to drive any woman over the edge in a matter of hours.

"You *are* Shu Keigetsu, right?" She checked to be sure. "If you're up to

something, go on and spit it out now.”

For some reason, the other girl awkwardly averted her gaze.

“O Great Ancestor,” she murmured under her breath. “Today, I relied on the help of others to indulge my own selfish desire to partake in fried potatoes. For this, I ask forgiveness.”

“What? I can’t hear—”

“After the night of the Double Sevens Festival, I became a different person. That’s all I can say about it for now.”

Leelee attempted to press the issue, but the other girl popped a fried potato into the redhead’s open mouth.

“That’s it, Leelee! Open wide!”

“Mmph!”

The bite-sized chunk of freshly fried potato was piping hot, and it practically melted in her mouth when she tore through its skin with her teeth. The liberal helping of salt had blended so well with the taste of the potato and the oil that Leelee’s eyes grew wide in spite of herself.

“Mmm! Th-this is amazing! It’s even better than I expected!” No sooner had the Maiden popped a potato into her own mouth than she flailed in delight, her hands pressed to her cheeks. “This is bliss... How wonderful it is to breathe in the oil’s aroma without getting sick to my stomach! I can eat as much as my heart desires! No, I can gorge on them! I can gorge on these fried potatoes!”

She seemed quite pleased with her creation.

Leelee stared dumbfounded as the girl nodded to herself over and over, her cheeks flushed and her eyes misty.

What the hell happened to her?

She hadn’t the faintest clue what had become of Shu Keigetsu. There was only one thing she knew for sure.

Is it even possible to drive this woman into despair?

The “simple” mission that woman in ivory silk had given her was going to be a

lot more difficult than she'd thought.

“Next up is the rapeseed! Come on, let's do this with a bang!”

The rice Leelee had brought to show off had long since cooled, left abandoned in a corner of the well-groomed yard.

Chapter 4:

Keigetsu Learns the Truth

AROUND THE SAME TIME, Kou Reirin—no, Keigetsu in Reirin’s form—heaved a beleaguered sigh. Two nights had passed, and still her fever had yet to subside. Frustrated, she sat up and leaned against a stack of pillows beside her bed. She could sense the court ladies over in the next room turn in her direction, alerted by the sound of her stirring.

“Is there anything we can do for you, Lady Reirin?”

They were high-ranking court ladies of the Kou clan, those permitted to clad themselves in gamboge gold. Keigetsu’s face relaxed into a smile when she heard their voices, deferential but filled with concern.

“No, I’ll be all right. Don’t fret over me,” she said meekly.

After a beat, the court ladies nudged open the sliding door.

“Your fortitude is one of your greatest virtues, of course, but we’d be saddened to be of so little help to you. Please don’t hesitate to tell us if there’s even the slightest of changes in your condition,” one attendant pleaded with her.

“You all worry too much! I’m fine, really. At ease.”

It was all Keigetsu could do to hold down her laughter.

Oh, I’m doing great!

How wonderful it felt to be fussed over and pampered. Her fever was running high and her joints were creaking, but she was enjoying her circumstances enough to sit up and indulge in conversation.

This is what I’ve always wanted!

Delirious with fever, she looked out over her room in satisfaction. As the residence of the empress, the Palace of the Golden Qilin was extra spacious. Most of the furnishings were a touch on the rustic side, perhaps a symptom of

the Kou clan's love of simplicity, but it was clear at a glance that everything was kept in tip-top condition.

A mild incense had been lit to soothe her soul. The fire burned low and far from her bed so as not to disturb her sleep. Her loyal court ladies showered her with concern, never losing the respect in their gazes. The place was overflowing with compassion for "Kou Reirin."

With this much love and care, even a sewer rat could turn into a delicate, graceful butterfly.

Keigetsu slumped her head against a pillow, an ironic smile etching its way onto her face.

She knew what people said about her in all the Maiden Court gossip. She was the talentless, treacherous Lady Rat. But as far as Keigetsu was concerned, it all came down to a matter of environment.

I never stood a chance from the start! How could the lowest-ranking daughter of the Shu clan, who had nothing going for her but a little knack for the mystic arts, ever hope to compete for His Highness's favor in the Maiden Court?

Keigetsu wasn't born to become a Maiden. She was nothing more than the daughter of the most miserable outcast of the Shu clan and a slender gentleman who happened to be a failed cultivator of the Dao. She had been meant to live a quiet life in the small countryside estate afforded to her, far removed from the five clans' power struggle.

The course of her life had changed only a year ago—when her parents committed suicide in the face of their mounting debt. With no one to turn to, she had been taken in as a maidservant to the main family, and by some twist of fate, it was there that she was discovered by Noble Consort Shu during one of her visits home and appointed as her fledgling Maiden.

"My, you poor thing! To have lost both parents at such a young age!"

Amid the clan known for its many fiery personalities, Shu Gabi had a reputation as a mild-mannered, compassionate woman, enough so to have caught the eye of the elegance-loving Emperor Genyou and earned the seat of the Noble Consort. She was also the only one of the emperor's wives aside from

Empress Kenshuu to have given him a son, although it had been a stillbirth.

She had chosen the Maiden to become her successor on the basis of neither aptitude nor profit but out of sympathy. In practice, that decision of hers had boosted her own reputation and made Keigetsu into the woman of the hour.

But looking back, that was where Keigetsu's good fortune had run out.

Just thinking back on those days makes me furious! The disdainful looks from my court ladies. The sneers of the other Maidens. Consort Shu is nice enough, but all she does is wring her hands.

Keigetsu chewed on her thumb in frustration.

There was no way someone who had moved to the capital only months ago would be able to read the scriptures with ease, or recite poetry, or know how to dance! Yet all anyone did was mock me!

Given that she had received no formal training to become a Maiden, the Shu court ladies and other Maidens had belittled her at every turn. They had mocked her for making too much noise when she walked, or talked behind her back about how ineloquent she was. As a consequence, Keigetsu had chosen to keep only court ladies who were even less educated and sophisticated than she was by her side.

The only one who hadn't laughed at her was the Maiden of the Kou clan—Kou Reirin. But that was exactly why Keigetsu hated her.

She was beautiful, intelligent, and even blessed in the personality department—the perfect woman. It was enough to make Keigetsu puke.

I can't stand her "I'm above it all" attitude! All she does is stand by and watch!

The way Keigetsu saw it, the whole reason Kou Reirin could be the prince's butterfly was that she'd come into the world with the deck stacked in her favor. She had been blessed with the ultimate status as the empress's niece, good looks, and blood ties to the prince.

What's more—perhaps owing to their earth qi, if one were to invoke the five elements—those of the Kou clan were known to be an unpretentious and devoted sort. Given the tough constitutions and caring natures of the rest of

the family, it only made sense that a fragile beauty like Reirin would be showered with love from the moment she was born. The incessant stream of letters and gifts she received from her older brothers, who were off fighting in another kingdom, spoke to how much the whole family adored her.

And it was the privilege of experiencing love that had made her a good person.

She could cultivate her skills because she had people warmly watching over her, not rushing or disparaging her. Even I could excel in an environment like this! It's easy to say a few gracious words when everyone treats me with this much love and care!

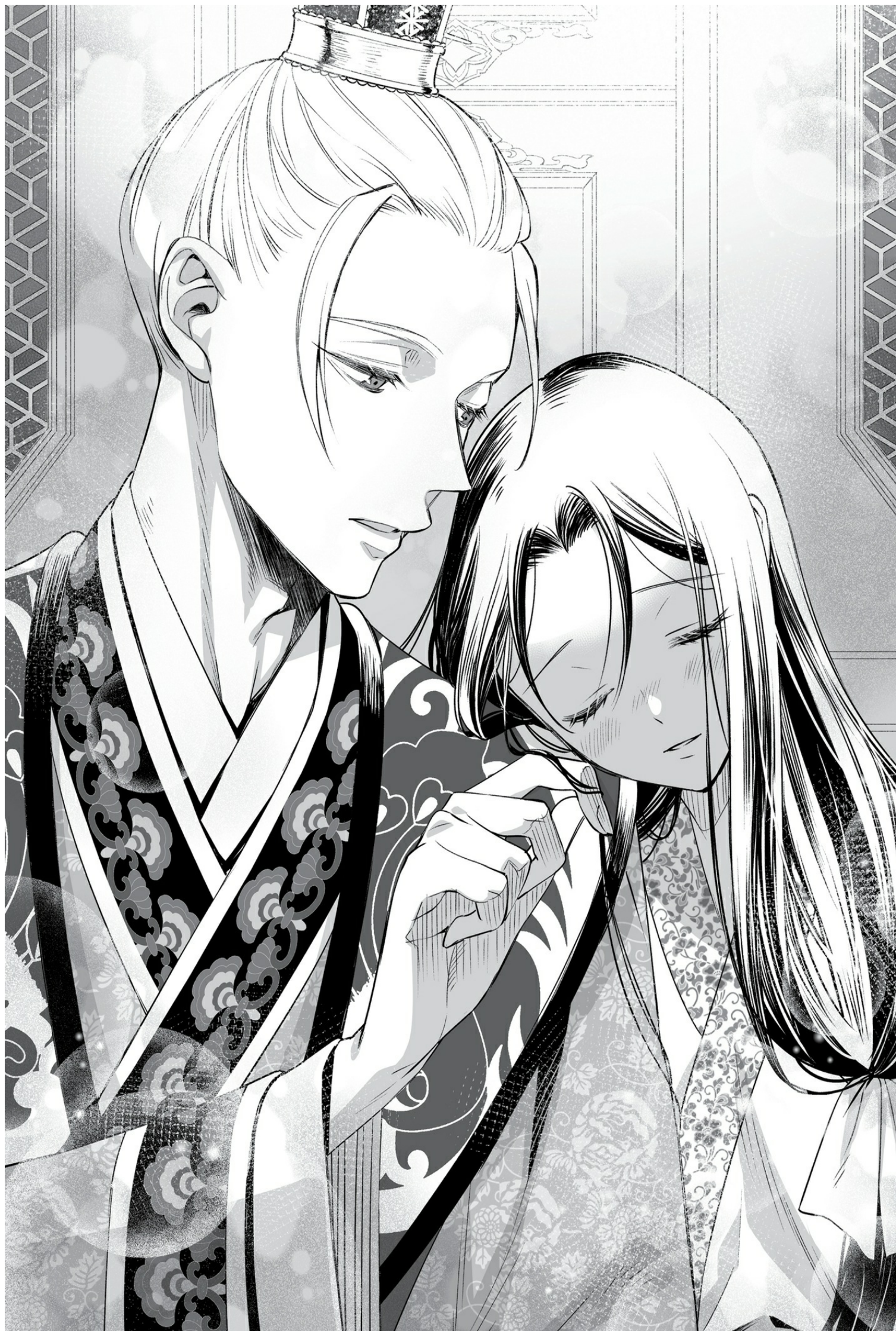
Keigetsu gave a pleased snort as she thought back to earlier that afternoon, when Gyomei had gone out of his way to visit her.

The crown prince was a master of both the pen and the sword, a charming man as vivacious as the sun. Yet for all his integrity, he was as cold as ice toward those he had deemed objectionable, and so Keigetsu had always gotten short shrift from him. Today, however, he'd shown her a sweet smile from start to finish.

"I'm sorry for any worry I caused you during the Lion's Judgment."

"I see your fever's still running high. Here, lean on me."

At times he sounded apologetic, at others concerned. Keigetsu couldn't count how many times her heart had fluttered in her chest as he whispered those words close enough for his lips to brush her ear.



Then, mustering all her willpower to keep herself from giggling, she'd said, "I'm all right. I'm only sorry to have caused you such worry, my dear cousin." Of course, she'd been sure to make the words sound as selfless and humble as she possibly could.

How delightful this feels!

With all this love and affection, it was easy to play the good girl. She could act the part of the empathetic, sensitive, and virtuous Kou Reirin without breaking a sweat. Why, in her new body, even seducing Gyoumei would be a piece of cake.

It's your own fault, Kou Reirin. This is what you get for being so oblivious to my feelings.

Keigetsu's face twisted into a catlike smile as she gazed out the window at the night sky.

Because of his deep affection for the innocent Reirin, Gyoumei had yet to make any serious moves on her. For precisely that reason, however, Keigetsu sensed that underneath his relaxed facade, he was getting quite impatient.

In all likelihood, it was only going to take a single push. A sweet nothing, or perhaps a dewy-eyed gaze? One subtle invitation, and Gyoumei would take Reirin before he'd even made her his empress.

How hysterical would that be?

How shocked would he be to learn that the true identity of the woman he'd won after yearning for so long had been Keigetsu, the one he'd always treated like a worm? And how anguished would Reirin be to learn that her body had been deflowered without her knowledge?

Both of them would hate Keigetsu, to be sure. But she'd take that over indifference any day.

"At least look at me..."

It had been one year since Keigetsu had come to the Maiden Court. She'd spent that time getting disrespected, ridiculed, and ultimately ignored. No —*Reirin*, at least, had never paid her any attention from the start. This would be

the perfect revenge against her.

“In hindsight, it’s a good thing she didn’t die in the Lion’s Judgment.”

If Reirin still lived in the body of “Shu Keigetsu,” on the off chance their switch came to light, Keigetsu could use her as a shield to avoid execution. She was the only one who knew how to return their souls to their original bodies.

That gave her a great idea: The next day, she’d make a case for the other girl to Gyomei. “I’m not holding a grudge, so please take care that she isn’t unduly punished.” That would be sure to boost “Reirin’s” popularity *and* ensure “Keigetsu’s” safety while she was at it.

But of course, the ideal was for the switch to go undiscovered so she could hoard all of Gyomei’s affection for herself. She would focus the bulk of her efforts toward that outcome.

“Hee hee. I’m looking forward to the days ahead.”

If nothing else, she was set to laze around for a while on account of her bruises and fever.

Just as Keigetsu grinned to herself and turned over in her bed, there came a knock on her door.

“Lady Reirin.”

It was Reirin’s head court lady, Tousetsu, who quietly let herself into the room. Among the unaffected personas of the Kou clan, she alone bore a calmness that could well be described as frosty. Word had it that this was owed to her distant relation to the Gen clan, masters of water and warfare. Now that Keigetsu was looking for it, she could indeed see traces of Gen lineage in the woman’s standoffish, emotionless features.

Those of the Shu clan, the sovereigns of flame, were fundamentally incompatible with the Gens and their affinity for water.

Not a trace of humanity about her, Keigetsu thought as she observed the woman’s wooden face, sticking her tongue out in spirit. On the surface, however, she received the visitor with grace.

“What is it, Tousetsu?”

“Now that your fever has persisted for two days, I came as fast as I could.”

Her lack of facial expressions aside, it seemed she was no less overprotective than the rest of Reirin’s retainers. Behind her, the low-ranking court ladies were carrying in boxes one after the other. Get-well presents, no doubt.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have! You’re always so considerate, Tousetsu.”

“Not at all. I realize that under normal circumstances, you’d have launched into your training within half a day of your fever’s onset. It was my own incompetence that held you back for two days, and for that, I offer my deepest apologies.”

“Pardon?”

Keigetsu hadn’t the faintest clue what she was talking about. While she furrowed her brow in confusion, the court ladies opened the row of boxes one by one at Tousetsu’s command.

The Maiden was rendered speechless by what she saw them unpack: a sewing kit, brushes, an inkstone, hand towels, a lute, a flute, and a zither. A dagger, a bow, and most shocking of all, a spade and hoe.

“What...?”

“Embroidering into the night, transcribing the sutras, practicing dance, learning the instruments, or perhaps basic fitness exercises? What shall you partake in tonight? The bow has been said to ward off illness since ancient times, so perhaps that would make for the most appropriate option. I am more than happy to accompany you until you’ve had your fill, of course.”

The look on the court lady’s face was dead serious, but Keigetsu couldn’t wrap her head around what she was saying. Those activities all seemed far too strenuous for a little sickbed diversion. And hadn’t she mentioned “training”?

What is she babbling about? Hello? I’m sick!

No matter how much a hard worker like Kou Reirin hated to miss a day of practice, it only made sense to hold off on all this until she’d recovered.

However, Tousetsu’s next awe-filled words shook Keigetsu to her core.

“It is when one’s life is in danger that the body grows most voracious in its

pursuit of knowledge and skills. It is in the haze of a fever that one can see a glimpse of what lies beyond their limits.’ Whenever I think back to the first time I attended your sickbed—when you so matter-of-factly spoke those words—a shiver runs down my spine. It tells me that the blood of the Kou clan, the greatest advocates of hard work and effort, runs thicker through your veins than anyone else’s. As a court lady, I am proud for the opportunity to accompany you in your training, which has come to call on the participation of even the empress herself.”

“Huh?”

“‘Sickness has long become a part of my everyday life. If I wait for a day when I’m feeling well, I’ll never have an opportunity to train.’ Well said indeed. A few good-for-nothing court ladies have tried to interfere out of concern for your fragile exterior, but rest assured: At the very least, I will always be on your side. I’ve sent those girls elsewhere for the evening. Now come, Lady Reirin! Have your pick.”

Tousetsu thrust the boxes toward her, but to put it plainly, Keigetsu couldn’t follow a word of what she’d said.

“Um, Tousetsu? I’ve been bedridden for two days.”

“I know. In truth, I had hoped to bring you your training supplies yesterday... but the gamboge golds ignorant of your true strength stood in my way, insisting I let you rest for a week after all you’d been through. It ended up taking me some time to talk them down. You have my apologies.”

“A-are you hearing me? I’m suffering from a fever so severe I can hardly sit up.”

“Yes. The ideal circumstances to achieve ecstasy. Your whole being is emanating a desire not to let this opportunity pass. I can feel it in my bones.”

I desire nothing of the sort!

Was this some elaborate joke of the head court lady’s? No, probably not. She’d kept a straight face the whole time, and despite the wistful looks they kept shooting her way, the other court ladies were laying out the training implements with brisk efficiency.

This really *was* business as usual for them. Kou Reirin had kept up with all this practice even when she was indisposed—no, *especially* when she was indisposed.

The corners of Keigetsu's mouth twitched. "I..." Her voice cracked, and she clutched both hands to her chest. "I feel a touch nauseated! I think my fever is getting higher. Why, it might be the worst I've ever had!"

"That's wonderful! No doubt you'll soar to unprecedented heights. Allow me to fetch you a washbasin."

"No! I mean... Something tells me this might be contagious! I can do without a washbasin or a training session, so I must ask that you all take your leave. Immediately." Keigetsu gave the women a strained smile, breaking into a sweat that wasn't at all an act. "You're all so dear to me. I couldn't live with myself if something were to happen to you," she added.

"Oh, Lady Reirin..."

The court ladies gasped, touched by her words.

"We didn't realize it was so serious! Let us call upon the apothecary at once!"

"Hang in there, Lady Reirin!"

"We're here for you!"

And then at long last, they began to react like normal people. As the room around her erupted into a flurry of activity, Keigetsu slunk down into her bed.

There's something wrong with these women.

That one word swam around in her head. This was wrong. This was all wrong.

Wasn't Kou Reirin supposed to be a delicate butterfly, protected and pampered by all those around her?

Keigetsu hadn't known the truth. The reason everyone was so protective of Reirin didn't lie in her poor health, nor could it all be attributed to the Kou clan's attentive nature. It was because she might work herself to death if left to her own devices, and those around her couldn't help but worry.

I can survive in this body...right?

Was the fever getting to her? Keigetsu felt a chill crawl up her spine.

Chapter 5:

Reirin Gets a Court Lady

REIRIN STRETCHED, basking in the sunlight that poured down from the bright blue sky.

“What a nice change from last night’s rain! It’s the perfect day to do some gardening!”

Once she’d arched her body as far back as it could go, she shielded her eyes with her hand and looked out over the yard. The dew on the leaves sprouting from the carefully landscaped ridges reflected the sun’s light, making the whole garden look like it was sparkling. Even the puddles were like mirrors reflecting the sky.

It had been four days since she’d traded bodies. If Reirin had to sum up her new life in one word, it would be “amazing.”

The produce and herbs grow fascinatingly fast, I never faint no matter how many days in a row I devote to gardening, no one worries if I stay up too late, and the food is delectable... Am I allowed to be this happy?! she asked the Great Ancestor in her mind, clasping her hands to her chest.

Though her current situation was meant to be Shu Keigetsu’s retribution against her, she was so content that she almost felt sorry for the instigator.

For one thing, it was wonderful to inhabit such a healthy body. Normally, even the tiniest bit of training required Reirin be prepared to risk her life, but her new body wasn’t the least bit daunted by a few sore muscles.

Part of that may have been due to the techniques she’d developed during her Reirin days, like the breathing exercises to ease her physical burden as much as possible or her own custom herbal mixtures, but she was still amazed at how much difference there was between multiplying by zero and multiplying by ten. After a mere four days of keeping up with her “basic” exercises and drills, she could already feel her muscles toning up.

The more work you put in, the better the trees and flowers grow and the healthier the body becomes. Oh, what thrill comes from seeing those efforts bear fruit! Is this what they call being a proud breadwinner on the street?

She stared entranced at her own limbs, their movements so sharp and well defined. Shu Keigetsu was among the tallest of the Maidens. Perhaps self-conscious of how she towered over the others, the girl had always carried herself with her shoulders hunched, to Reirin's recollection. Despite that, she still dressed in flashy garments, and in doing so gave off a mismatched and unattractive impression.

Reirin thought that was a waste. She was better off building her arms and legs to their fullest potential and flaunting the lithe motions of her body for all to see. Being someone who valued "robust" beauty above all else, Reirin broke into a smile as she massaged her burgeoning biceps from over her robe.

Muscles! That's the mark of strength! She even had the secret desire to one day get a six-pack. *Sadly, I don't think I can manage that in the next three days...*

The purification rite was going to last a week. In other words, the Maiden Court would be reopened in another three days. When that happened, she would be released from house arrest and come face-to-face with Shu Keigetsu —no, "Kou Reirin."

What is Lady Keigetsu thinking, I wonder?

A distressed frown overtook Reirin's features. She had yet to grasp the full picture of Shu Keigetsu's plans. The Maiden had schemed to take Reirin's place and life out of jealousy, but what did she want now that Reirin had survived the Lion's Judgment?

If she wanted to keep the truth from getting out, she ought to have been more persistent in her attempts on Reirin's life, but Reirin had yet to find herself in a life-threatening situation since making it through the trial. Could Keigetsu have given up on her murder plot and opted to focus on prolonging the switch instead? Or had she simply been in no condition to launch a new attack? According to the rumors Leelee had mentioned, "Kou Reirin" had been sick in bed since the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

"Either way, nothing will change until I talk with her," Reirin muttered to

herself.

She *had* made an effort to see the other girl prior to this. However, despite the innocent verdict handed to her in the Lion's Judgment, there was no way "Shu Keigetsu" would be permitted to see "Kou Reirin" under the circumstances. To put a finer point on it, she hadn't even had the chance to explain herself to the Noble Consort. The Shu Palace's ostracization of "Shu Keigetsu" was still going strong.

Yes... That's what happened. I tried, but I was forced to give up, leaving me no choice but to reluctantly and unwillingly take advantage of the situation. Yes, siree!

Under any other circumstances, Reirin wouldn't have backed down after encountering the one setback. If she didn't get a reply to her first letter, she would have kept on writing them, and she might even have gone as far as to ambush or lure out her target.

The reason she had nonetheless capitalized on Consort Shu's lack of response to her written request to talk and chosen to maintain the status quo was that she had grown quite fond of her newfound life.

Bad Reirin! Even if she did push for it, you have no right to foist that piece of junk body onto someone else! Besides, I'm not the only one affected by what happens to "me." I have my responsibilities as a Maiden, the many court ladies who have sworn their loyalty to me, the empress I respect and hold so dear, and fried potatoes... New herbal remedies to be discovered... The caterpillar fungus I found yesterday...

She squeezed her hands together and fought to make herself see reason, only to get distracted by the stray thoughts that popped into her mind.

As Reirin moaned and groaned, a gruff voice called out to her from behind. "What are you mumbling about so early in the morning? It's giving me the creeps."

It was Leelee, who was still rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Oh, Leelee! Good morning. You're up early." Reirin greeted her with a smile.

The redhead's face twitched. "Says the one who woke up before her own

attendant.”

Though Reirin had at first been taken aback by Leelee’s vulgar language, she had become quite fond of this expressive girl. She was living by herself, after all. As much as Reirin relished the freedom, it could get lonely at times. In such moments, it was nice to have a conversation partner to keep the atmosphere bright.

When all is said and done, we have been eating and sleeping together for the past four days.

In the end, Leelee had eaten all three meals with Reirin and slept in the storehouse. Technically, she’d gone back to the court ladies’ chambers once the first night, but she’d returned to the shed in the middle of the night with all her bags packed. And while Reirin was feigning sleep, the girl had clenched her fists and wiped at her eyes over and over again.

Even now that Leelee had settled down in the storehouse, Reirin didn’t push her for an explanation. Considering her red hair, a rare sight in the Kingdom of Ei, and the pale pink robe she wore despite serving as a personal attendant...it wasn’t hard to imagine the circumstances that had befallen her.

Leelee seems to be making the most of her time here too.

When Reirin cast a glance Leelee’s way, the girl went from looking deep in thought to averting her gaze in a fluster. No doubt she’d been brainstorming her “volunteer activity” for the day.

Sorry, not “volunteer activity”! I meant “prank”! Reirin corrected herself. If Leelee had somehow happened to overhear her thoughts, she would have been furious for sure.

Perhaps in revenge against Shu Keigetsu, or perhaps on someone else’s orders, Leelee had been putting her all into making Reirin miserable. To name a few examples, she’d dumped a box full of insects into the garden, stabbed her pillow with a pair of scissors, and even gathered up muck and smeared it all over the yard. It was a series of bold actions that a high-ranked attendant to a sheltered noblewoman would never think to take.

Yet from Reirin’s point of view, just as she was thinking she’d like to till the

garden a little more, Leelee had supplied her with a bunch of earthworms. Just as she was thinking she'd like to do some sewing, Leelee had handed her a pair of scissors. And just as she was thinking she'd like to improve the soil, Leelee had given her a big helping of manure. Each stunt only served to please her mistress.

Over the past few days, it had become a running gag for Reirin to squeal in delight each time Leelee tried something, much to the latter's utter bewilderment.

No, I can't get carried away! Leelee is trying her hardest to get to me; I mustn't diminish her efforts!

The Kou clan had a soft spot for hard workers and gutsy individuals. Reirin wanted nothing more than to see Leelee's earnest efforts rewarded, so she felt awful that she had let the girl down by failing to provide even one good scream. She felt awful...but in all honesty, there was a part of her that couldn't wait to see what Leelee tried next.

I'd love to get my hands on a kitchen knife or some dye, she thought, bursting with anticipation.

"Hey. You're thinking something dumb, aren't you?"

Leelee whipped around to glare at her, to which Reirin responded with a solemn shake of her head. "Not at all! I was merely admiring your diligence."

She wasn't *lying*, exactly.

Knowing that her cover would be blown if the other girl pressed the matter any further, Reirin took that moment to change the subject. "Come! Now that you're awake, it's time for breakfast! On today's menu we have steamed potatoes as our starch, fried potatoes for the main dish, a side of stir-fried potatoes, and some fried potatoes as a palate cleanser!" she announced with a beaming smile.

"That's not cleansing! That's heavy! It's all *potatoes*!"

Her enthusiasm met with scathing criticism, Reirin's face fell. "Oh no... And to think I put my all into making this meal, convinced there wasn't a soul in the world who wouldn't like it."

“Where did this blind faith in potatoes and oil even come from?!”

Of course, it was because she never got to eat much of either during her Reirin days.

In this new body of mine, the smell of the oil won't give me heartburn, and I won't pass out from an overdose of salt... Isn't it human nature to want to fling open the door to one's desires?

Nodding inwardly at her own logic, Reirin brushed aside Leelee's protests. “Fear not. Though both are fried potatoes, I made sure to use different seasonings for the side dish and the palate cleanser. I'd never fail to account for something like that! Now give me just a moment to wrap up here.”

“Listen to me!” Leelee shrieked as Reirin ignored her attendant to go put the finishing touches on breakfast. However, as soon as she saw the Maiden wrap a large leaf around her arm, she shut her mouth, incredulous. “What are you doing?” she asked, only to be swiftly silenced.

“Shh! This calls for a good deal of prudence, so please be quiet.”

Careful to cover her hands and arms, the Maiden made as little noise as possible as she approached the wall of the storehouse—or, to be more precise, a tiered stack of big, sturdy wooden boxes she was presumably using to store food.

“Is there a reason you're being so cautious?” Leelee asked, dubious.

“Shh!” Reirin hushed her again and then slowly lifted the topmost box.

The moment she did, several small silhouettes rose up and floated around her. Leelee gave a strangled cry as she watched this from behind. Unbothered, Reirin gently positioned the box over a pot she had set out.

Drip, drop.

A golden liquid oozed from the box in tantalizingly slow drops, pooling at the bottom of the pot.

“What are you doing?!”

“Harvesting honey.”

As it turned out, the abandoned stack of boxes was home to a beehive.

Turning white as a sheet, Leelee cried, “W-w-w-watch out! You’ll get stu—!”

Reirin smiled back serenely despite the swarm of bees buzzing around her. “The bees toward the top of the hive are focused solely on producing honey, so they’re quite docile. So long as I don’t damage the bottom of the hive, I should be safe. In theory.”

As a matter of fact, the moment Reirin put the box back where she’d found it, the bees were soon to follow, absconding back into their hive one after the other. Once she’d watched the very last one disappear into its nest through the gap in the boxes, Leelee finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“I can’t believe you... Who in their right mind sticks their hand into a beehive?”

“What’s this? Are you afraid of bees, Leelee?”

Reirin bowed before the boxes and said, “Thank you for your wonderful blessing.” She then turned back to Leelee. “Come to think of it, the insects you collected were all crawlers—spiders, centipedes, and the like. Do you have a problem with winged insects?”

“It’s not the *wings* that are the problem! What kind of girl likes bees?!”

“Oh? Now that you mention it, I suppose I do favor crickets.”

“Huh. That’s not too strange, actually,” Leelee mumbled, sounding a touch relieved that she’d named a bug known for its gorgeous music in the autumn months.

Crickets taste just like shrimp when they’re dried and crushed! If my self-sustaining lifestyle carries on for long enough, I ought to try catching some. They can be used to make medicine too.

It sounded like they agreed, but in reality, they were on two completely different pages. However, that was at the bottom of the list of Reirin’s current concerns.

“Oh, what a beautiful color!”

She was talking about the honey she’d collected in the pot. Much the same as

with liquor, the first few drops to fall had been beautifully clear, free of residue from either the hive or the box.

Ahh! When the bees have made a little more honey, I'd love to take some kind of knife and cut out a tiny portion of the hive. How wonderful it would taste crunched between my teeth!

Reirin gazed down at the honey in a trance. Just looking at its smooth, viscous gold was enough to make her salivate, and her heart pounded in her chest as she imagined the white, crystallized honeycombs, the crunch of their texture, and the sweetness that would ooze out of them.

Plus, if I can get a whole chunk of the hive, I'd like to try my hand at making beeswax from the drained honeycombs! I could light it at night and savor its aroma, or I could use it in cosmetics... Oh, what enriching days await me!

Her court ladies never would have allowed her to harvest honey during her “Reirin” era. She’d never even imagined she’d get to try her hand at it in an abandoned storehouse like this. Once again, Reirin gave thanks for her lush new habitat.

She lifted the pot with an air of reverence, almost as if she were handling a piece of jewelry, and moved it to the corner of the yard that she’d designated the kitchen.

Atop the stove—which she’d built out of stones used in the storehouse walls—a faint trail of steam rose from a neat row of freshly fried potatoes. Reirin plunked each of them into the pot and coated them in the honey. The sticky, amber glaze looked irresistible.

Reirin called over Leelee, who had been watching her work with a touch of impatience. “Open wide!” she insisted with a smile.

Over the past few days, Reirin had managed to win over Leelee’s stomach, if not her heart. Though the redhead shrank back, protective of her personal space, she hesitantly did as she was told.

Reirin popped a piece of fried potato into her open mouth, and with an “Mm!” Leelee’s eyes widened a fraction.

Pleased with her reaction, Reirin likewise helped herself to a mouthful of the

so-called “palate cleanser.”

“Mmmm!” she cried, pressing both hands to her cheeks and flailing on the spot.

I can't get enough of this!

The first thing she tasted was a straightforward sweetness, saccharine enough to numb her tongue. While that honeyed flavor swept over her taste buds, she bit down into the piping-hot potato, the crunch filling her mouth with the rich flavor of the oil and potato in an instant. It had been worth the effort of frying them so slowly and painstakingly that one might wonder if those poor potatoes had murdered someone she loved.

“This is bliss...”

Reirin wiped tears of joy from her eyes, then quietly pressed her hands to her chest.

It felt almost sinful to flood her mouth with such euphoria from the very start of the day. She was living a life where she didn't have to fight off waves of nausea, fret about her overwhelming amount of prescriptions, or assuage the worries of those around her. Her biggest dilemma over the past few days had been whether to season her fried potatoes with salt or honey. For the record, she had settled on both.

No, Reirin! You're just using this body to do some repair work on Lady Keigetsu's storehouse!

Was it her imagination? She could have sworn she was succumbing to the temptation faster and faster with each passing day. Reirin cast a timid glance around her all-too-alluring surroundings.

Weeds were already shooting up from the ground despite her plucking them only two days ago. The storehouse's plaster was peeling away, and its interior was on full display, fascinating inner court architecture and all. The vegetables flourished in the blink of an eye, bursting with seeds. Her lovely court lady provided her with animated conversation.

I can't help myself! There's so much to be done here!

For natural-born caretakers like the Kous, there was no more rewarding a sight than a series of problems that needed fixing. Good fortune had more than just fallen into her lap—it was raining down by the bucketload.

I'll start by weeding the garden and reinforcing the grass beds I wove. The branches I cut on the first day ought to be withered by now, so I'll smoke those to use as a disinfectant. Next, I'll rearrange the loose stones from the storehouse, take the vegetables, and...hmm, perhaps I can add them to our stock of preserved food. If I make too much, I'll have the leftovers delivered to the Shu Palace kitchen. Oh, or maybe I should turn the gourds into cosmetics! And then...

Just thinking of all the things she wanted to do—and knowing that she had the stamina to pull them off—was enough to drive her wild.

Though she gave herself a serious scolding each time a smile threatened to creep over her face, she nonetheless went about the preparations for breakfast in high spirits, failing to suppress a delighted grin.

Leelee, on the other hand, was eyeing her cheerful yet inscrutable roommate like she might strike at any moment.

Damn it... What's wrong with her?

That was the problem: She was *too* cheerful. As hard as it was to believe, the woman before her—the woman who was supposed to be Shu Keigetsu—was never without a serene smile on her face.

Can people really change this dramatically?

The Shu Keigetsu that Leelee knew was the epitome of an unpleasant person. She'd butter up her superiors in her most cloying voice, then turn around and kick her lessers to the curb without hesitation. She'd rub other people's shortcomings in their faces, screeching and throwing things the moment she didn't like what she saw. One time, she'd even doused Leelee in ice-cold water on a winter day, and on another occasion, she'd threatened to turn Leelee over to the Eagle Eyes for a theft she hadn't committed.

How did that explain the woman sitting before her now? She rose with the sun, beating her own court lady to the punch. She worked hard on maintaining

the garden, rejoiced when the flowers bloomed, and even attended to Leelee's every need.

Without any other context, it might sound like she'd undergone a complete change of heart, but other parts of it didn't add up. The other day, for example, she'd plunged her hand into a box of insects to sort them, even tilting her head to one side and musing, "Hmm, I'm running out of containers, so perhaps I should keep the spiders and the centipedes together."

Before Leelee could stop herself, she'd snapped back, "What, are you planning to curse someone?!" It was no tone to take with a Maiden, but she was pretty sure that was the natural reaction—less so because she was dealing with a scumbag and more because the things the girl said and did were enough to make anyone want to scream.

Moreover, the Maiden had a huge appetite. She seemed particularly fond of fried foods, and not a day went by that she didn't cook something in oil and go on to sing its praises with tears in her eyes.

Just yesterday, she'd held out half of a fried potato to Leelee and said, "Er... You're a growing girl, so I'll let you have the bigger half." But she had looked so utterly devastated about it that Leelee had ended up taking the smaller one. Right on cue, her cheeks had flushed with emotion, and she had thanked her benefactor profusely. For a fleeting moment, Leelee had almost thought her cute—but no, this version of Shu Keigetsu was no Shu Keigetsu at all.

Then who was she? Now *that* Leelee didn't know.

A well-spoken, mild-mannered, adventurous, and insatiable girl. Leelee had never met anyone like her in her life. The only conclusion she could draw was that the Maiden had indeed gone mad in the dungeon.

And she had yet to figure out how to torment a madwoman.

"Dear me! The hem of your robe is frayed, Leelee. Give it here; I'll mend it for you."

"Don't bother. And would you quit using that cursed doll as a pincushion?! It's creepy as hell!"

"Oh, I'm sorry! It just seemed like such a convenient use for it!"

The girl had scrambled to get out her sewing kit, and in her hand was the cursed doll Leelee had hidden in the shed two days ago, the length of its body jabbed with needles.

That's exactly the sort of thing I'm talking about!

When she saw that the gift giver herself looked ready to scream, the Maiden flipped the doll over in a hurry and started shifting the needles around.

"There we go. If I stick the pins into the back and shoulders, doesn't it look like she's getting acupuncture?"

"Absolutely not!" Leelee yelled.

How had it come to this? She was supposed to be harassing Keigetsu as a means of revenge, but it was starting to feel like an exercise in futility. Here she'd thought that getting a silver ermine robe for tormenting the girl she hated was a deal too good to be true, but she was beginning to doubt this job was worth the trouble.

Already exhausted, Leelee heaved a weary sigh. The other girl's shoulders sagged apologetically.

"I'm sorry. I know I must be making things hard on you. If I'm being honest, I *want* to get so scared that I cry and vomit blood, but I can never seem to manage it."

"Stop. You're making me look worse."

When the redhead sighed again, robbed of her will to fight, the girl with Shu Keigetsu's face hesitantly ventured, "In that case, why don't you stop these volunteer...*ahem*, these pranks altogether? You're a wonderful court lady—passionate, principled, and hardworking. Wouldn't it serve you better to leverage those strengths and put your all into your actual job?"

"..."

Leelee stared into the other girl's eyes. This was the first time she'd ever been complimented to her face. Not just by Shu Keigetsu but by anyone.

Afraid to take those words at face value, she immediately brushed them aside. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

She couldn't stand the pounding of her own heart. The last thing she wanted was to be touched by this woman's words.

"All you've ever done is mock me, and *now* you're breaking out the praise? What's your game?"

"You see, um..."

"Don't tell me to focus on my 'actual job' like it's none of your business. I've been ordered to look after a would-be criminal in an abandoned storehouse, remember? *You're* the one who took me away from what I should be doing!"

As she glared and jabbed her finger at the Maiden, her mind fell into agreement with the words leaving her mouth. She detested this woman. Hated her. It was only natural, after all the torture she'd put her through.

Although the pair had avoided starvation in a series of fortunate coincidences linked to the storehouse's location, if their luck had been any worse, Leelee wouldn't have been able to get by without Gayou's aid. If she wanted a chance at life moving forward, she had to drive this woman into a corner and get her hands on that silver ermine robe.

"You want me to do my actual job, but can you offer me any sort of compensation for my loyal servitude? You can't, can you? Or are you willing to guarantee me a reward or a promotion?"

"Well, no... I'm afraid I can't give you much of anything as I am now..."

"See? Then don't talk so big!" Leelee all but spat.

The other girl drew her mouth into a thin line, then hung her head. Detecting a clear hint of sorrow in her eyes, Leelee averted her gaze. With the way the conversation was going, it was turning into a one-sided dressing-down.

No! I haven't done anything wrong. This is me getting back at my tormentor! she subconsciously told herself, then was startled to realize what she was doing. If she had to tell herself that, it meant she didn't really believe it.

"Where are you going, Leelee?! We haven't had breakfa—"

"Shut up!"

Appalled to realize she had been won over in a mere handful of days, Leelee

fled the scene as fast as she could. However, despite her storming out in a huff, there was nowhere for her to escape to in the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion. For lack of destination, her legs carried her toward the communal space that was the Maiden Court.

It was as she was drifting toward the court that a certain voice called her to a halt for a second time. “My, what perfect timing. Stop right there.”

A round fan adorned in sheer silk and an ivory silk robe. It was that high-ranking court lady of the Kin clan, Gayou.

Leelee was supposed to give her reports in the evenings. Caught unawares by this untimely encounter, she rushed to her knees. Since she had knelt down right beside a puddle, water soaked the hem of her robe.

“It’s a pleasure, Lady Ga—”

“I’m disappointed in you, Leelee,” the woman interrupted before she could even finish her sentence. The redhead swallowed hard.

Leelee couldn’t see her face behind the thin layer of silk, but she could sense the chill in the woman’s gaze as she looked down upon her.

“I’ve taken you at your word and given you rice for each of your reports, but from what I hear, Shu Keigetsu has been spending her time in that storehouse with a smile. The washerwomen were gossiping about it.”

“Y-you see...”

The low-ranking court ladies, who were in charge of delivering the laundry wherever it needed to go, often came and went from their palaces and sometimes used a shared washroom in the inner court. One of them must have spotted Shu Keigetsu squealing over her discovery of some amazing new herb and brought it up in a round of gossip.

“How could someone who was assailed with bugs and cursed dolls, who had a blade thrust into her pillow, and whose garden was covered in muck smile without a care in the world? You’ve lied to me.”

“No! I have not. I really did do all those things! I swear it upon the Great Ancestor!” Leelee pleaded with her. She couldn’t let this cost her that silver

ermine robe.

“Oho? You’d swear that? So you mean to tell me that you *have* abandoned all allegiance to the Shu clan?”

“Yes. Without a doubt.”

“And Shu Keigetsu *hasn’t* won you to her side?”

“Of course not,” Leelee replied without a moment’s hesitation.

Gayou lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Then at last, she drawled, “Very well. I’ll overlook it this time.”

“Th-thank you very much!”

“However.” At that, Gayou fished around in her sleeve and tossed what she found there to Leelee. It was a heavy dagger sheathed in a black scabbard.

“Next time, I want proof. Use this.”

“For...what?”

She had handled plenty of needles and scissors, but this was her first time holding a weapon. Leelee gulped at the reality of its heft, while the ivory-clad woman gave a beleaguered sigh.

“Why ask me? It’s your job to figure that out. Do what you will. All that matters is that I have evidence to present to Lady Seika. It can be a chunk of her robe or her hair or her heart. Rip out whatever you please.”

“But...” Leelee lifted her face, which was taut with tension. “There’s a line between harassment and...bloodshed. You claimed you could bribe the Eagle Eyes, but to turn a blade on a Maiden—however disfavored—would merit a much more serious response. I’ll be executed.”

For all her pranks, Leelee had remained careful to toe the line for her own safety. There was a huge difference in risk between insulting Shu Keigetsu or vandalizing her living space and hurting the girl herself.

Yet Gayou responded curtly, “So what?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t seem to understand the position you’re in.”

The red lips peeking out from behind her fan lifted into a smirk. It was the same scornful smile Leelee was used to seeing around the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

“From the moment you accepted my hairpin, I’ve held your life in my hands. If you won’t do as I ask, I’ll turn you over to the Eagle Eyes. For the crime of stealing from the Kin clan, that is. If it’s the word of an ivory silk against a pale pink, not to mention a foreigner, who do you think they’ll believe? The answer is clear as day.”

“No...!”

“Did you really think I’d give you a silver ermine robe? *You*, the likes of a dancer’s daughter, whose only talent lies in seducing men? Don’t make me laugh.”

The cruelty of her words drained the color from Leelee’s face.

“Well then, I’ll see you this evening.”

Leelee clung to the skirt of Gayou’s *ruqun* as she turned on her heel. “Please wai—!”

Thud!

The woman kicked her away without hesitation. She pushed her muddy shoe to Leelee’s chest, shoving her down on her back. Water splashed and mud splattered across her cheeks.

“Don’t touch me. You won’t be fed until after the job is done, little miss rat.”

Gayou shot one last parting remark in a sickeningly sweet voice, then took her leave for good.

Leelee watched her go in a daze.

“Why don’t you wipe that bored look off your face, Shin-u?” a voice called out with a sigh. Shin-u looked up, startled.

From where he stood in the middle of the cloister, a certain man of noble bearing—Prince Gyomei himself—gave an exaggerated shrug. He was looking

at Shin-u with an air of nonchalance, dressed in a different *po* robe than the one he wore on official business. Despite his rebuke, his handsome features were tinged with amusement, but Shin-u still responded by going down on his knees.

“My apologies. I’m tired of accompanying you on your daily visits to the Palace of the Golden Qilin, and I made the mistake of letting my displeasure show on my face.”

“Don’t pick a fight in the same breath as you apologize. I might have to take you up on it,” Gyoumei shot back, amazed at the audacity of his guard. Their banter sounded rather irreverent for a prince and his captain of the Eagle Eyes—and even for a pair of half brothers. The explanation for this was simple: If Gyoumei’s words were to be believed, Shin-u was someone he had accepted into his inner circle.

Gyoumei, the crown prince of the Kingdom of Ei, was a just ruler and a master of the pen and the sword. Blessed with masculine good looks and a broad-minded personality, he was a prince among princes. It was said that from the moment he was born, the roar of his dragon’s qi had shaken the capital, and his regal bearing had inspired love in every woman he met and admiration in most of the men. But it was those very circumstances that had robbed him of his interest in other people.

In his own words, he found it all dull. Everything fell too easily into his lap.

If it had been anyone else saying that, Shin-u would have scowled and dismissed him as arrogant, but having lived close to his half brother for the past few years, he could see why the man felt that way. When it came down to it, the people around Gyoumei were far too infatuated with him.

For example, whenever a woman laid eyes on him, she would exhale a dreamy sigh; even the lower-ranked court ladies were no exception. Scholars were astonished by his intellect, tacticians took their hats off to his skill in the art of war, and even the eunuchs were eager to get his attention.

His mother, Empress Kenshuu, had once asked a Daoist cultivator to take a look at him. The verdict was that because he was a mix of all five clans’ bloodlines, the Great Ancestor’s providence dwelled strongest in his soul. His people had been delighted to hear that he was blessed with the spirit of a

supreme ruler, assured that he would succeed in all his future endeavors, but the man in question had been disillusioned by the news.

“Great. Then it’s all the same no matter what I do,” had been his take on the matter.

Reflecting his strong Gen heritage—the clan of water and warfare—Gyoumei’s father, Emperor Genyou, was a coldhearted man. On the other hand, his mother loved hard work and challenges with a passion, as befitting a daughter of the trailblazing Kous.

As a mix of their personalities, Gyoumei’s soul always yearned for a stage to put his talents to the test, yet he’d had everything handed to him from the start. Depression soon set in, and this led him to cast a cold eye upon those who would fawn over him. To him, the women who cooed over him and the vassals who were all too eager to get down on their knees were no different from faceless dolls. And so it was easy for him to make impartial rulings, never letting emotion cloud his judgment.

On the flip side, the moment he opened up to someone, he grew strongly attached.

Perhaps due to all the hardships Shin-u had endured—abandoned by his mother from a young age, handed off to become a vassal, sent to the battlefield—he’d had an air of detachment about him since he was a boy. Oddly enough, that had served to catch the prince’s eye, with Gyoumei’s first impression of him being: “I like those empty eyes of yours.”

According to what the prince had to say about it later, the sight had stirred up the service-minded Kou blood sleeping within him. Whatever the case, despite the latter’s status as the oft-shunned half brother of a prince, Gyoumei had shown Shin-u great favoritism from that moment onward. Even when the superior officer he’d clashed with on the battlefield had sent Shin-u off to the inner court, the prince had secured him a stable position and spared him the loss of his genitalia. The captain of the Eagle Eyes held such status that he could even be “gifted” the lowest-ranking consort.

Though as a trade-off, he also uses me a lot.

As much as Gyoumei adored Shin-u, he was too clever not to use his half

brother to uncover the palace women's true natures. What's more, he found the man's skill as a swordsman useful enough to enlist him as a bodyguard each time he visited the inner court.

Today, he had been called upon to accompany Gyoumei on his visit to Kou Reirin, who was still indisposed. The prince had brought plenty of get-well gifts for her, so Shin-u's primary role was that of his packhorse. Forced to cart around a huge stack of boxes and listen in on his half brother's sweet nothings, Shin-u was too put out not to voice his complaints.

"If you ask me, there's no need to go see her every day."

"Don't be ridiculous. How could I turn my back on the very Maidens who were gathered for my sake?"

He said it as though it were a matter of course, but he never would have paid a visit to one of the other Maidens. He might not even have bothered to write her a condolence letter. That was how blatantly Gyoumei favored Kou Reirin.

"You can skip a day or two. If you have that much time on your hands, I could always ask Lord Kousai to give you more work to do."

"Don't you dare! You'd sell your own half brother out to that demon? Have you no humanity? Besides, I'd hardly call a mere half an hour *that* much time. No need to blow this out of proportion."

Kousai was a bureaucrat who largely handled financial matters. Though he was a highly competent man, he was known to be merciless when it came to assigning workloads, and he made no exception for the imperial family. Gyoumei shrugged his shoulders and put on an exaggerated show of dread, but Shin-u knew full well that it was an act. It was only by navigating his busy agenda and knocking out his already tremendous workload ahead of schedule that Gyoumei could make time for these brief meetings in the first place.

Shin-u was torn between admiring Gyoumei's ability to pull off such a feat and marveling at the charms of the Maiden who made him want to do it.

"I always thought you weren't fond of the cute, dainty types, Your Highness. Lady Kou Reirin must be quite special," he ultimately muttered, a hint of protest in his tone.

“Oho? You think Reirin’s greatest strength lies in her delicacy?” Gyoumei responded, lifting an eyebrow. He seemed almost amused. “She’s a born and bred Kou woman—strong-willed as they come. It’s been five or so years since I was introduced to her, and she was the first woman not to blush upon meeting me. I can’t have you underestimating her.”

If their first meeting had been five years ago, she would have been around ten at the time. Shin-u was tempted to argue that she’d simply been too young to understand love, but in Gyoumei’s particular case, it was indeed rare for even prepubescent girls to refrain from making eyes at him. He could see why that single encounter might have been all it took for Gyoumei to let Kou Reirin into his inner circle.

“She’s often ill, but her efforts to hide that from the people around her are charming. Whenever I’m around her, I can feel the Kou blood surging up within me, lighting a desire to love and pamper her.”

“Is that right?” was Shin-u’s halfhearted response.

Given how well behaved she was, the Eagle Eyes had limited interaction with Kou Reirin. The most Shin-u had ever seen of her was at formal ceremonies, and since he had to stick close to Gyoumei on those occasions, he had no way of knowing this so-called “true nature” of hers. As far as Shin-u could tell, Kou Reirin was nothing but the graceful, delicate woman she appeared to be.

What’s so appealing about a woman like that?

From that point in the conversation, Shin-u paid little attention to the rest of Gyoumei’s delighted ramblings. He claimed that—perhaps because the Double Sevens Festival had given her quite a fright, or perhaps because her fever had gotten that bad—she was depending on him more than usual. The prince laughed, professing that it filled his heart with joy to see it.

“Reirin’s charm lies in her resistance to my dragon’s qi and an innocence that keeps her at arm’s length, but I can’t deny the desire to touch the woman I love. Never once had one of my sweet nothings worked its charms on her, and now I have *her* clinging to *me* with tears in her eyes. I can’t get enough of it.”

He reminisced about their last encounter in the Palace of the Golden Qilin, looking very much the picture of a man in love.

Unsure how to respond, Shin-u mumbled a few noncommittal replies, at which Gyoumei heaved an exasperated sigh. “You make for a terrible conversation partner. Don’t *you* have a girl or two you’re interested in?”

“I’m afraid not. Perhaps the blood of the infamously coldhearted Gen clan runs too deep within me.”

Shin-u’s mother was a foreigner. His father’s Gen clan seemed to be the only one of the five families to have manifested in his blood.

His half brother’s response had Gyoumei’s shoulders shaking with mirth. “You fool. That’s going to make it all the more of a sight to behold.”

“What?”

“Waters are often still, but on occasion, they can rage hard enough to break a dam. Those of the Gen clan seem aloof in most circumstances, but when blessed with the right partner, I hear they can love or hate even more fiercely than the Shus. I can’t wait to witness the moment a man as apathetic as yourself finds his heart shaken and loses all semblance of composure.”

Shin-u shrugged his shoulders, failing to buy what the prince was saying through his smirk. With the exception of Gyoumei, he had never met anyone who didn’t fear him, mistrust him, or come on to him. He couldn’t imagine a single one of those people inspiring such emotion in him.

Oh, but...

All of a sudden, the image of a certain woman flashed across his mind. It was the girl who had stared down a caged beast with perfect composure, then turned around and panicked over a rat, plucked weeds down in the mud, and oh-so-innocently begged for salt. The very Shu Keigetsu who was supposed to be haughty and arrogant, who had never done anything but suck up to him before.

“As a matter of fact, though my Kou heritage dilutes it, I too can feel my Gen blood start to boil whenever someone I care about gets hurt. When I look at how much pain Reirin is in, all I want to do is run up to Shu Keigetsu and grab her by the collar, chivalry be damned.”

Shin-u was startled to hear her name come out of Gyoumei’s mouth, almost

as if the other man had read his mind.

“Even on her sickbed, Reirin is concerned enough about Shu Keigetsu to ask that she not be unduly punished, yet rumor has it that the woman is spending her time in the Shu Palace laughing without a care in the world. She’s being disciplined in name only. No doubt she’s enjoying the same quality of life as ever, pushing her court ladies around with her trademark tantrums and threats.”

She always remained on her best behavior around those in power, but Gyoumei wasn’t fooled. He had seen right through to her conceited nature.

Shin-u, who had seen her “house arrest” for himself, opened his mouth to argue. “No...”

It was the opposite: Her living conditions had been wretched enough to outweigh the crime, and there hadn’t been a single attendant in sight. She hadn’t even attempted to boss a eunuch around, and she hadn’t asked the captain of the Eagle Eyes to stick around longer than he needed to.

It doesn’t sound too believable when I put it like that, though.

However, finding his own explanation too far-fetched, Shin-u opted to keep his mouth shut. Her change of heart had been dramatic enough to seem suspect, and even if he *did* tell Gyoumei, the prince was sure to insist that she’d been putting on a facade of humility. He’d gone as far as to say that he’d have the woman’s head the next time she imitated Kou Reirin; secondhand stories would only fuel the flames of his anger.

Would it be faster to have His Highness see for himself?

It came down to her facial expressions, her gestures, and the little pauses when she talked. There was something wrong about her that could only be sensed in a face-to-face interaction, and if he wanted to share that feeling with Gyoumei, Shin-u would have to bring him to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

But that was easier said than done. Considering Gyoumei’s burning hatred of Keigetsu, would he even be willing to set foot there? Besides, the only reason he was allowed entry to the Kou Palace was that he was the son of Empress

Kenshuu. Even the crown prince wasn't to visit the clans' private palaces on a whim.

"Captain!"

Just then, someone called out to Shin-u from behind. He turned around to see who it was.

"Excuse me, Your Highness. May I deliver an urgent report to the captain?"

It was Bunkou, who was looking uncharacteristically flustered.

As soon as Gyoumei granted him permission, the eunuch rose to his feet from where he lay prostrate and whispered his news to Shin-u. "I have a report from one of the Eagles Eyes assigned to the Maiden Court. A girl in a pale pink robe was spotted heading for the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion with a dagger in her hand. She was wobbling on her feet, and her behavior was concerning."

"Concerning how?"

"Er, well... She looked ready to stab someone, you might say. It was almost like she was out for revenge."

Shin-u looked back at Bunkou with a frown. "Why didn't he stop her then and there?"

"This may come as a surprise to a certain big shot who loves to wave his Eagle's crest around, but most of us eunuchs have a lower standing than even the lowliest court lady! He couldn't set foot in the Shu Palace on such vague and potentially mistaken grounds, let alone detain an attendant!" the slit-eyed eunuch rattled off, annoyed.

"Besides," he added somewhat hesitantly, "the pale-robed girl wasn't headed for the Noble Consort's abode but for the outskirts of the palace—where the storehouse is."

"Then what? The eunuch thought he could turn a blind eye so long as Shu Keigetsu was the one getting hurt?" Shin-u asked, the pitch of his voice dropping.

Bunkou fell silent. He was right on the money.

The captain doubled down, a chill in his words. "The Lion's Judgment cleared

Shu Keigetsu of her criminal status. To spit in the face of—”

“That’s enough, Shin-u.” Gyoumei cut him off in a tone that left no room for argument. “The eunuch standing before you has done nothing wrong. Neither has the one who gave the report.”

Shin-u raised his voice in spite of himself. “Why?! Do you mean to say that it doesn’t matter what’s done to Shu Keigetsu?”

“No, it’s not that. If those of the inner court feel entitled to inflict their own punishments on Shu Keigetsu, it’s my own attitude that enabled that. As the prince, I’m to blame for making my distaste for her public knowledge. The fault lies with me, not the eunuchs who picked up on my favoritism.”

The prince gave a helpless shrug of his shoulders. Even when consumed with hatred, he was capable of making rational judgments.

“My apologies. I spoke out of turn,” said Shin-u.

“It’s fine. The sight of you throwing a tearful, red-faced tantrum was priceless.”

“I didn’t do that.” He was quick to refute the prince, but his legs were already taking him toward the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion.

“Wait.” Gyoumei called his half brother to a halt. “I don’t want to punish Shu Keigetsu beyond what’s necessary, but neither do I want to coddle her. Your emotions seem to be running high, so I’ll tell you a little story to cool you down.”

“What?”

“Shu Keigetsu once fabricated an allegation of attempted assault in order to have a eunuch beheaded.”

Shin-u was speechless.

A sharp rage overtook Gyoumei’s lightsome eyes. “This was before you took up your post—around when the rest of the court had begun to distance themselves from her, disillusioned with how poorly she was adapting to life here. In a desperate bid for attention, she smashed a jar to pieces and insisted that the eunuch had threatened her with one of the shards. Though as it turned

out, her story was so shoddy and full of contradictions that he was acquitted.”

“But why would she...?”

“The reason was simple: That eunuch had laughed at her when she screwed up a poetry reading at a ceremony. If she took offense to the slight, she could have rebuked him then and there. She had the right and the power to do so. But instead, she cowered in our presence and let it slide, only to turn around and seek revenge on him later.”

The Maidens held absolute authority in the Maiden Court. If it weren’t for the intervention of the crown prince, the only one who could go over their heads, that eunuch would have been summarily executed. It was those underhanded tactics of hers that had earned her the wrath of the justice-minded Gyoumei.

Shin-u cast a glance at where Bunkou kneeled beside him. He was maintaining his silence, the look on his face as stony as it had ever been. *This must have been the “torment of his colleagues” he alluded to before*, Shin-u pieced together with a sigh.

“She’s always like that. She craves attention, but she makes no effort of her own and refuses to air her grievances aboveboard. All she does is shoot wistful glances, burn with jealousy, and lash out when she’s upset.”

Seeing as one of those tantrums had nearly cost him his precious butterfly, her behavior wasn’t something Gyoumei could tolerate.

“...”

Shin-u furrowed his brow. The girl Gyoumei and Bunkou spoke of didn’t match up with the girl he’d met in the Lion’s Judgment or outside the storehouse.

Or no—maybe they were right. It was true that Shu Keigetsu had shot him coy looks in the past. As was it true that he’d been forced to settle altercations she had instigated.

In that case, was it correct to assume that her true nature was that of a wicked coward, and the way she’d acted during those two encounters had been the exception?

“Of course, I have no reason to stop you from fulfilling your duties. Go on, Captain. Just keep a cool head about it.”

“I appreciate the advice, Your Highness.”

Before Shin-u could make up his mind either way, Gyoumei dismissed him with a wave of his hand. In the end, the guard took that as his cue to turn on his heel.

“I’m such a bad mistress...”

Reirin was down in the dumps. She was hugging her knees and staring down at the dirt, watching a procession of ants go by. The sight of them slaving away to bring food back to their nest made her heart ache.

“So industrious... They must have a positive work environment. What do you little ones get in exchange for doing your jobs? Food? Shelter? Or is the work its own reward?”

Her words cut deep. Reirin covered her face with her hands. Even the bugs crawling on the ground were somehow compensated for their labor.

“And yet there’s nothing I can do to repay Leelee for all her hard work...”

The situation was exactly what it looked like. For some time now, Reirin had been stewing on Leelee’s words and beating herself up over them.

Leelee was a great court lady. She seemed to have built a good deal of resentment toward Shu Keigetsu, but even so, she carried out her duties, moved to the storehouse as she had been ordered, and slept and ate with her mistress. She had good poise, gave prompt replies despite her rough manner of speech, and above all else, she was a sincere girl at heart. Reirin liked that last trait of hers in particular.

Not many people are that open about their feelings.

Due to her poor health since childhood, the people around Reirin had always been the perfect picture of kind and considerate. They had been overflowing with love, never looking at her without a warm smile or concern in their eyes. The rarest of the bunch had been Tousetsu, who never showed much emotion.

But how about now? Everything had changed since the night of the Double Sevens Festival. First, she'd been threatened by Shu Keigetsu, then berated by Leelee. Though these brand-new experiences had taken her by surprise, at the same time, it had made her think, *Wow. So people can have negative emotions like these too.*

On some level, she'd always known that she had grown up in a blessed environment, but when she finally threw open the window and exposed herself to the cutting cold winds, she had found the sensation to be far more stimulating than she ever could have imagined.

If people bathed in that bitter cold for too long, they would end up hurt. They would crumple. But much like those living in the tropics can't help but reach out for snow, Reirin was compelled to pick up and scrutinize each of those dazzling bursts of emotion. The crystals of anger were sharp-edged and beautiful to behold.

Leelee, in particular, was the one who had accompanied Reirin from morning to night for the past few days. Watching her attendant gawk in shock, squint in suspicion, go red in the face yelling, or take the smaller piece of fried potato had filled Reirin with the same sort of affection she might feel looking at a small animal. The sight of the redhead awkwardly pulling weeds because "she had nothing better to do" had convinced Reirin of what a good girl she was.

To top it all off, the girl had guts. Knowing she must have collected all those insects while screaming her lungs out was enough to make Reirin want to drag her back to the Kou Palace and make her a high-ranking court lady right then and there.

For all that, it was true that Reirin had yet to give anything back to Leelee.

I'd love to give her one of my personal belongings from the Palace of the Golden Qilin, like a hairpin or a comb, but that's not going to happen under the circumstances.

As the price for receiving food and shelter, court ladies weren't paid much; favors from their mistresses made up the difference. Reirin, who perpetually hovered on the verge of death, had always taken the initiative to give her court ladies material goods as a form of bequeathment. However, now that she

inhabited Shu Keigetsu's body, she couldn't give Leelee any of her possessions from the Kou Palace.

But on the other hand, it wouldn't be right for me to give away Lady Keigetsu's things without her permission.

That was the part that troubled her. Despite the fact that Keigetsu had switched their bodies for her own convenience, Reirin's moral code prevented her from messing with the other girl's personal belongings.

Since she had been exiled with nothing but the clothes on her back, she didn't have much to hand out in the first place. But the one robe she had left to her name—the flashy one Shu Keigetsu had worn on the night of the Double Sevens Festival—was a superior article, and even a lock of her hair was sure to fetch a good price.

It would be one thing to give her something worn out and discarded, but I can't cut or get rid of something that still has value.

She wanted to repay Leelee, but she couldn't. Reirin's brow scrunched as she struggled to hold back tears.

"Ugh, I mustn't... Crying will compromise my immunity!"

Lowering her resistance to disease—that was Reirin's greatest and only fear.

She shook her head back and forth, then slapped her cheeks and gave herself a pep talk. "Come on, let's do this with a bang!"

She'd been crouching on the ground for so long that her calves had gone numb; considering the sturdiness of her new body, that meant she must have been moping for quite some time. When she saw that the sun was already past its zenith, she hurried back to the storehouse to get lunch started.

It was then that she heard a *shrrk*.

Picking up on the faint noise coming from inside the storehouse, she gave a curious tilt of her head. It sounded almost like a cat sharpening its claws—or maybe tearing something apart. Reirin poked her head into the dim light of the shed, wondering what it could be, and her face lit up at what she found there.

"Oh, Leelee! You came back! I was so deep in thought that I didn't even—"

She opened her mouth to express her delight, only to shut it mid-sentence.

Her back turned to Reirin, Leelee was ripping up the robe that hung on the wall.

“Leelee?”

Shrrk. Shrrk.

“What are you doing? That’s...”

The only fine article of clothing in this storehouse. But before Reirin could finish saying as much, she trailed off again.

This time, it was because Leelee had whipped around to look at her.

“This is all your fault.”

The sight of her made Reirin gasp. Her clothes were sopping wet, and mud streaked her fair cheeks. Her hair was disheveled, and her eyes were alight with fury as she glared at the intruder.

Both her voice and the hand clutching her dagger were trembling.

“*You* did this... You ruined me!”

“Calm down, Leelee! You’re going to catch a cold. Why don’t you change clothes, wash your hands, and take some deep brea—”

“Shove it!” the girl yelled, waving away Reirin’s outstretched hand with her dagger. “What’s a stupid cold to me?! That’s nothing compared to what’s become of my life! It’s all over!”

Tears rolled down her cheeks with the words. It was clear that she wasn’t thinking straight.

“Leelee, you need to pull yourself together. Come now, set the blade down and take off that dirty—”

“Don’t touch me!” When Reirin reached out for her, undeterred, Leelee shouted even louder than before. “Damn it! Damn it all! I’ve been tainted from the start! No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, I’ll never be called anything but a dancer’s daughter!”

“You shouldn’t say that, Lee—”

“Don’t mock me!”

Her eyes screwed shut, Leelee swung her dagger wildly through the air. Reirin ducked out of the way as fast as she could, but the blade clipped a strand of hair near her ear, which then fluttered to the dirt-covered floor.

Ahhh! I’m so sorry, Lady Keigetsu!

Though she’d managed to dodge, she had forgotten to account for the difference in the height between her and Keigetsu. Reirin apologized to the girl on instinct for losing a chunk of her hair.

Oh, but she did have a lot of split ends there...

Reirin was a touch relieved upon stealing a glance at where the hair had come from, but while she was distracted, Leelee raised her dagger high overhead.

“Damn yooouuu!”

The sunlight pouring in through the hollowed-out window glinted off the tip of the blade. Reirin looked up, her eyes growing wide as she made out the silhouette of the dagger above her.

Thmp!

In the same moment, Leelee’s arm was brought to a halt with a soft thunk.

“What are you doing?!” came the accompanying shout.

It was Shin-u.

He twisted the arm he’d caught and forced Leelee to drop the dagger, and then, true to his name as an Eagle Eye, restrained her with all the swiftness of a bird of prey. Bunkou, who had been hanging back behind him, took that opportunity to kick the blade into a corner of the storehouse.

“Are you all right?”

“Captain... Master Bunkou...”

Reirin responded to Shin-u’s piercing glance by gaping in shock. Her brain couldn’t process what the two of them were doing here.

So she can show honest emotion on her face.

Shin-u and Bunkou, meanwhile, observed the dumbfounded girl with caution. Reflected in her round-eyed stare was pure, unadulterated surprise. If this was a performance to garner sympathy, the arrival of an audience ought to have had her exuding glee, but there wasn't a hint of that in her expression.

But what truly perplexed Shin-u was that she didn't look the least bit scared either. He didn't have a clue what she could be thinking.

She doesn't look like the sort of calculating villainess His Highness described, but neither does she look like a helpless, pathetic woman.

Keeping the battle-ready, guarded Bunkou in his sights, Shin-u chose his words carefully. "We came to check on the situation because we received a report of an armed court lady heading for the outskirts of the Shu Palace. Bloodshed is strictly prohibited in the inner court, and any transgressors are to be severely punished. With that in mind, I ask you both: What happened here?" His tone was low and dark.

When he looked down, he saw that the court lady was covering her face and trembling where she lay crumpled on the floor. Part of it was that she'd come to her senses, but Shin-u's imposing aura was just as much to blame for her reaction.

Though there was no comparison to the dragon's qi Gyoumei possessed, which could captivate women with a single gaze or strike down men with a single glare, Shin-u was himself a descendant of the imperial family. If he deepened his voice and narrowed those crafty eyes of his, even the most fearless Maidens were sure to cower before him. A low-ranking court lady with zero connection to the emperor never stood a chance.

Having washed his hands of Leelee, Shin-u instead turned to the girl who was standing rooted to the spot.

Would she turn as pale as her court lady, or would she shriek and bemoan her plight with tears in her eyes? Based on Shu Keigetsu's behavior to this point, Shin-u had predicted one of those two options, but the girl did neither.

"What happened here, you ask?" she repeated, calmly putting a hand to her cheek and tilting her head to the side.

Shin-u gave a slight frown, sensing something off about the gesture. Then, her next words caused those knitted eyebrows to shoot straight up, his eyes going wide.

“Let’s see... I had her trim my split ends.”

“What?”

“As I said, she helped me with my hair.”

Even the restrained attendant lifted her face, speechless. So did Bunkou. And who could blame them? Nobody had expected Shu Keigetsu to say something like that in this situation.

Is she trying to protect her court lady?

Shin-u’s mouth twisted in displeasure. Not only had her reaction betrayed his every expectation, but even worse, the excuse she’d come up with had been downright pathetic. He didn’t like being lied to.

“Covering for her? A so-called villainess should stick to what she knows, Shu Keigetsu. Did you think I’d buy that excuse after she cursed you out with a dagger in her hand and then broke down crying?”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s the honest truth.”

And yet, she didn’t back down. She looked Shin-u dead in the eye, not a trace of cajolery or trepidation in her gaze.

“Regardless of what Leelee was thinking or planning, all she actually did was clip a few of my split ends. To cast doubt or blame over things that didn’t happen would be nothing but a waste of strength.”

Shin-u couldn’t help but stare in wonder at her dignified bearing. Behind him, he could sense Bunkou’s breath catch in his throat.

It was the same. This was like the Lion’s Judgment all over again. There was something oddly farsighted, composed, and *striking* about her manner.

Who is she?

He felt his heart thump in his chest.

Before he could arrive at an answer to his question, however, the girl with

Shu Keigetsu's face flashed him a sweet smile. "So while I must apologize, may I ask that you take your leave? As you can see, my court lady is soaking wet. I'd like to get her changed without any gentlemen around."

Her tone of finality gave Shin-u and Bunkou yet another shock, and the pair exchanged glances.

This was Shu Keigetsu, who hated to be disrespected more than anything—who would seek attention by whatever means necessary. The girl who would put on her best dewy-eyed, fawning look the moment she saw someone in power. Yet here she was again, dismissing Shin-u and Bunkou without a second thought.

"Is that your way of saying you'd rather take the punishment into your own hands, away from our prying eyes?"

"Goodness, no. Whyever would I punish my attendant for giving me a trim? That aside, Captain, could I ask that you let Leelee go? Her wrist is sure to swell up in a man's grip."

What's more, she was even expressing concern for her court lady.

Shin-u awkwardly let the redhead up, only for the Maiden to hold out a hand and ask, "Can you stand?" The two guards looked on in utter amazement.

Not a hint of cruelty could be found in her gentle gaze. There was something very natural about the way she stroked her attendant's back; it didn't look at all like she was holding back her anger for appearance's sake.

"It was an honor to have you come all this way. Now if you'll please excuse us."

"Hey..."

The girl gave a graceful bow, almost like Kou Reirin would have.

"Um, excuse me!" Bunkou couldn't help but shout, awed at how smoothly she had prompted them to leave—at the impossibility of it all. "Isn't there something you'd like to tell us?"

"Hmm?"

Someone in her position ought to have had dozens of complaints to lodge

with the enforcers of the Maiden Court. For example, the fact that she was being forced to live in a storehouse far too miserable to be a Maiden's chambers or that she had almost no attendants around to serve her. Or, for that matter, the deep-rooted antagonism she faced even after surviving the Lion's Judgment.

Any one of those would do. If only she would lash out at them and bemoan her misfortune, Bunkou could disdain her the way he always had. He could at last sneer and celebrate that she'd been driven into conditions squalid enough to match her foul nature.

However, she neither screeched nor made those coy puppy-dog eyes of hers. She only gave a curious tilt of her head.

No, not only that.

"Oh, perhaps so," she responded with a faint giggle. "I believe there *was* something, but I have more important matters to attend to right now."

Her smile was a gentle one, as airy as a butterfly fluttering through the sky.

The guards couldn't tear their eyes away from her, and at last, she forced the conversation to an end with another bow. "Please excuse us."

She left Shin-u and Bunkou no choice but to retreat. It would be one thing for the assailant to plead her innocence, but the clear victim in this situation—Shu Keigetsu—was the one denying her court lady's crime. The Eagle Eyes didn't have the authority to go over her head and investigate.

"Don't do anything we'll need to hear about," Shin-u said in what sounded to his own ears like a struggle to have the last word. Then he left the storehouse with his partner.

"..."

The two men continued down the trail in silence for a while, until Shin-u eventually muttered, "There's something off about her."

As his companion pushed aside the dense grass trapping them on either side, Bunkou nodded in immediate consensus. "I agree."

"She's changed too much. The dungeon isn't enough to explain it."

“I agree.”

“I bet His Highness is going to find this difficult to believe. We’d better be careful about what we put in our report.”

“I agree.”

Even the smart-mouthed Bunkou was so disarmed by what he’d just seen that he was nodding along in complete sincerity.

When at last the grass thinned out and the Shu Palace’s standard gravel path came into view, Shin-u proposed in a grumble, “So I think you should be the one to write it.”

“I *disagree*.”

The captain of the Eagle Eyes and his subordinate walked along together for some time after their summary dismissal, but as soon as they’d passed through the gates of the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion, the two men went their separate ways in silence.

Thank goodness... I got them to back off without a fight.

Meanwhile, Reirin breathed a sigh of relief as she watched the pair go.

If it had been Gyomei who had come to see them, the prince’s intolerance of deception and strong force of will might have made him more persistent in pressing Leelee and Reirin for answers; she was glad they had been graced with these two Eagle Eyes and their unconventional brand of kindness.

It didn’t even occur to her that her disconcerting behavior was the reason the guards hadn’t come on quite as strong.

I know I should have told them about the swap...but Leelee’s more important right now!

Reirin abruptly switched trains of thought and turned to the other girl. “Come, Leelee! Off with that dirty robe. Then turn your back to me.”

Leelee stared back with fear in her eyes, until at last she shrugged off her outer robe, despair written all over her features. Once she was down to only

her underwear and *ruqun*, she complied with her mistress's command, kneeling on the floor and turning away.

"Are you going to whip me, milady?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous! And what happened to your usual perky tone?"

"I mean..." The hands Leelee had clasped to her chest were trembling ever so slightly. "I...tried to kill you."

Reirin paused the busy motions of her arms to huff a soft giggle. "You're a very kind person, Leelee."

Then, she draped a robe over Leelee's hunched back. It was a vivid, blazing scarlet.

"Huh?!"

"If I take it in around the shoulders, it'll be a perfect fit. Hee hee. It's a good thing you didn't do any damage to the lining."

It was the same robe Leelee had shredded but turned inside-out. The reverse side of that dense patchwork of gold and silver threads was an unpatterned length of blazing scarlet cloth.

Startled by the sudden weight and warmth of the cloth shrouding her shoulders, Leelee cast a glance behind her. Reirin looked back at her with a smile.

"I know. The inner layer will feel too stiff and uncomfortable if you wear it as is, won't it? Don't worry—I'll be sure to remove all the metal threads and mend the tears. Believe it or not, I'm rather confident in my sewing skills."

"What are you...?" Leelee murmured in a daze.

"What do you mean, 'what'?" Reirin responded cheerfully as she adjusted the front of the garment. "I'm talking about the robe I plan to give you, of course."

I was hesitant to hand out Lady Keigetsu's things without her permission, but now that it's been reduced to a tattered mess, I'm sure she wouldn't mind.

Reirin was delighted to at last have something she could give her hardworking court lady.

“How lucky for us that it happened to be such a rich red. Pale pink is a lovely color as well, but I think blazing scarlet will be the perfect fit for a spirited go-getter like you.”

Blazing scarlet was a darker shade than either pale pink or cinnabar rust. It was the color worn by the highest-ranking court ladies of the Shu clan.

“What? But I don’t...deserve...”

“Now whyever would that be? You serve me more closely than anyone else.” Reirin hushed Leelee’s flustered objections in a gentle voice. “You can keep the metal threads I’ve removed when I’m done. Those ought to fetch a decent price, no?”

“But why...?”

“Because you’re a beloved court lady of mine. Why else? I’m so glad to have something I can give you.”

The redhead was stunned into silence. Reirin took that moment to soak a towel in a jar of water, which she then used to carefully wipe Leelee’s hands clean.

“Listen here, Leelee. There are three secrets to good health: washed hands, clean clothes, and a smile. Any court lady of mine must adhere to these standards no matter what.”

“You can’t be serious... I turned a blade on you with the intent to kill,” Leelee mumbled in protest.

“You *did* turn a blade on me, but the worst you did was cut a few hairs, remember?” Reirin shot her down. “If I have the energy to berate you over something that didn’t happen, I’d be better off putting it toward other things.”

Leelee stared at Reirin like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing, until at long last, she laid a tentative hand on the scarlet robe.

“...”

The girl hung her head. When Reirin noticed how her shoulders had begun to tremble, she gave a rueful smile before cupping the redhead’s face between her hands. Then, in a flash of mischief, she gave each cheek a pinch.

“Ow!”

“Hunching your shoulders is bad for you! Come now, Leelee, lift your face. Always be sure to throw out your chest, breathe deep, and look straight ahead. I’m sure your mother would be cross if you ruined your health staring down at the floor.”

“My mother?”

Leelee blinked in confusion at the sudden mention of her family.

“Yes. She was a foreign dancer, wasn’t she? Even a military officer can’t fight without his sword. To venture to a far-off land with nothing but the clothes on one’s back and make a living there is quite the feat! I’m sure she never missed a day of training. As her daughter, you must strive to live up to her example.”

As an athletic-minded girl with a love of exercise, Reirin meant those words from the bottom of her heart. However, when sobs racked Leelee’s body, tears streaming from her eyes like a dam had burst, the Maiden withdrew her hands in surprise.

“Leelee?”

“...”

The tears wouldn’t stop.

Why...? How can she say things like that...?

Between uncontrollable sobs, Leelee heard her mother’s voice in the back of her mind.

“Listen here, Lily, my darling daughter. A girl must always throw out her chest with pride. Remember that.”

The voice of her mother, who had pronounced her name with a foreign accent. Though Leelee had been forced to learn the language of Ei from her city friends because her mother wasn’t fluent, she had always loved to hear the gentle, soothing lilt of her native tongue.

“Stand up straight and don’t let your eyes wander. It takes confidence to dance like a fluttering butterfly.”

Her mother, who had been so adept at flitting and twirling through the air like a butterfly. For a reason Leelee couldn't quite explain, she sensed her lithe figure and dignified, unwavering gaze reflected in the girl who was peering at her with such concern.

"I'm...sor..."

The words spilled from her mouth before she even realized what she was saying.

"I-I'm sorry...for being so rude...and bullying you... For ripping your robe...and cutting your hair..."

"It's fine, Leelee. Like I said, I'm not bothered at all."

When the Maiden reached out and pulled her into a gentle embrace, Leelee's tears came down even harder. This was that same insidious woman who had bathed her in ridicule for ages. Yet mysteriously enough, Leelee knew without a doubt that she meant each and every word she was saying.

Yes. She *knew*.

She knew that the Maiden was acting out of genuine concern for her.

"Rather... I'm sorry it took me so long to notice how trapped you felt."

There wasn't a hint of falsehood in her apology.

As she hiccupped out the last of her sobs, Leelee had a dazed thought: *She's changed... She's a completely different person now.*



This wasn't an act, nor was it a superficial attempt at repentance. It was like she had been reborn into a better person, right down to her very soul. Had she lost her mind in that horrifying dungeon, or had her wicked heart been purified in the Lion's Judgment? Leelee wasn't sure what had caused it, but there was one thing she knew for certain.

She wanted to be with this new version of Shu Keigetsu.

I should return the hairpin and the rice to Lady Gayou.

Perhaps the woman would take that opportunity to turn her over to the Eagle Eyes. But if that was how it turned out, then that would be that.

Either way... I don't have it in me to betray or torment this girl ever again.

Leelee stared vacantly at the other girl through puffy, red eyes. The Maiden was once known for her sharp gaze and the perpetually sinister look on her face, yet all her ugliness had vanished without a trace, leaving her with nothing but the pleasantness of an early summer breeze. She was patient, mild-mannered, and benevolent. This was the new Shu Keigetsu.

She's always smiling so serenely...

Or so she thought, until Reirin cut her reverie short. "Well then," the Maiden said as she rose to her feet. "It seems we've reached an understanding. If you're all cried out, it's about time we got down to business, Leelee."

"What business?" Leelee asked, cocking her head to the side and giving the girl a blank look. She could have sworn that whole series of events had covered the biggest issues at hand. Was there something else left to address?

"Goodness. Why do you think I sent those men away?" she replied, putting her hands on her hips. "Hand-washing, good hygiene, and a smile—I take those three secrets to staying healthy very seriously."

"O-okay..."

"And yet." At that, the smile on "Shu Keigetsu's" face grew wider than ever. "Someone smeared your face and clothes in mud."

She wrung the dirtied towel in her hands with more force than looked strictly necessary.

“Someone robbed you of your smile and pushed you to the point of believing that it was all over for you.”

The Maiden took her sweet time crouching down, bringing her face right up to Leelee's. The redhead broke out into a cold sweat on what could only be described as pure instinct.

“Uh...”

“Tell me, Leelee. What fool thought to sabotage the most precious health of my most precious court lady?”

There was an unmistakable rage burning in the girl's eyes. Goosebumps running down her spine, Leelee amended her previous thought. The new Shu Keigetsu certainly *was* a friend to all living things. A girl with a smile like a warm breeze.

That reminds me! She gets this really scary look on her face when she finds an aphid on the stem of one of her plants!

But she could be pretty terrifying too.

Chapter 6:

Keigetsu Panics

IT'S HOT! It hurts! This is killing me!

Keigetsu growled and clawed at her own throat.

“Ugh... Ah...”

It hurt to breathe. She repositioned herself countless times, rubbing her head up against her pillow, but it gave her no relief from the constant threat of asphyxiation. She felt like she was going to lose her mind.

It was now the fourth night since the Double Sevens Festival, and still Keigetsu's—no, “Kou Reirin's”—body was racked with fever.

What's...happening to me?

Her whole body creaked. The fever blurred her vision. She couldn't believe that such misfortune had befallen her.

But the most unbelievable part of it all was that the court ladies would see how badly she was burning up and ask with consternation, “You aren't running as high a temperature as usual... Is it more painful than it looks?” There was sympathy in their eyes, but there was also genuine confusion. Keigetsu knew what that had to mean: As far as they were concerned, this degree of fever was nothing out of the ordinary.

That's crazy! I can't believe this! Did that woman... Did Kou Reirin always go about her business running fevers this high?!

To Keigetsu's knowledge, Reirin had never once missed a Maiden Court ceremony. Every now and then, she might collapse at the end of a particularly eventful day, but she would still show up the next morning wearing her usual tranquil expression. Given her position, Noble Consort Shu had to be more informed of the other clans' affairs than Keigetsu. However, while she'd heard the consort lavish plenty of praise upon Kou Reirin, she'd never heard mention of her being *this* sickly. Thus, Keigetsu had assumed that the rumors of her

fragility had been exaggerated to catch the prince's attention.

"Medicine... What medicine do I take?"

But now, she was learning firsthand that not a word of it had been overstated. Not only did her fever refuse to go down, but the moment she was doing well enough to pick herself up off the floor and try her hand at playing a musical instrument—Tousetsu had pressured her into going along with it for an hour—she had lost all feeling in her arms and her whole body had gone limp.

Worse still, the dresser next to her bed that she'd assumed was for storing clothes was filled top to bottom with medicine. Astoundingly enough, it was all Kou Reirin's own concoctions. She was sick so often that she had begun growing herbs from a young age, believing it would be faster to prepare the medicine herself than to call upon the physician each and every time she fell ill. If the proud recollections of her court ladies were to be believed, she had surpassed said physician by the age of ten.

The medicine came in all shapes and sizes and was painstakingly numbered into the two hundreds. It sounded like Reirin mixed and matched her doses based on her symptoms, but needless to say, Keigetsu had no idea where to begin. Some of them emitted a foul odor, while others had retained the form of an insect; she hesitated to start gulping them down at random.

As a consequence, Keigetsu had no choice but to pretend everything was fine, only to suffer in solitude once she'd sent everyone away in the evening. Her fever ebbed and flowed, and it got especially bad around nighttime and dawn.

"Come on! Which one?!"

Her eyes flashing, she dragged herself over to the dresser and pulled open a drawer. As she had rarely even caught a cold prior to this, Keigetsu didn't have much experience taking medicine. She had no clue what was most appropriate for her situation.

Huffing and puffing like a bristling cat, she at last slumped over on the spot.

"Help me..."

What left her mouth was a feeble scream.

“Save me! It hurts... I’m scared...”

Whenever she closed her eyes, a viscid darkness threatened to consume her. More than the asphyxiation, more than the fever, that impending blackness was what frightened Keigetsu the most.

Were fevers supposed to wreak this much havoc on the body? She could sense the end looming near. The fetid jaws of the beast known as Death were right before her face. So overwhelming was the fear that it threatened to strip her of her entire sense of self.

This is messed up!

She couldn’t breathe. Everything hurt. She couldn’t stand how scared she felt. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Why am I still so miserable...even after switching lives?

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

No longer capable of rational thought, she gave into her instincts and glared down her candle.

She’d never wanted to speak to her again—not to that woman beloved by all, as elegant as a butterfly mid-flight.

“Save me...”

As Keigetsu stared into the candle, fighting to control her ragged breath, its flame trembled and billowed.

“Save me, Kou Reirin!”

Leelee still isn’t back yet...

Reirin fidgeted as she glanced at the storehouse door. It had been several hours now since she’d gotten the full account of what had transpired.

After saying, “I’m going to return the hairpin and rice to that ivory silk,” Leelee had gone to their usual meeting place near the Maiden Court. Their rendezvous were supposed to be in the evenings, but it was now the hour of the rooster—past sundown—and she had yet to return.

Is she all right? I knew I should have gone with her.

Kou woman that she was, Reirin had a fussy and overprotective side to her. She was worried sick about her attendant. Of course, she *had* made a point of insisting, “I’ll go settle the score,” but Leelee had turned white as a sheet at the suggestion.

“No! Please let me handle this! You shouldn’t be leaving the palace when you’re under house arrest! Not to mention that look on your face—it’s like when you slaughtered all those aphids with your bare hands!” She had rushed to stop Reirin, citing reasons the latter didn’t quite understand.

What sort of face was she talking about? Reirin wondered, giving herself a light bop on the cheeks.

For the past few days, she had been cutting gourds from the garden into thin slices and sticking those on her face, which had left it feeling nice and smooth. Shu Keigetsu’s skin seemed to be as tough as the rest of her; she hadn’t gotten a rash from any of the cosmetics Reirin had tried thus far, so she could really have fun experimenting. The girl had a body worth perfecting, both when it came to physique and skin care.

But still... Lady Seika of the Kin clan did all that? I had a feeling she favored me, but I never imagined she’d go that far.

Cupping her face in her hands, Reirin drew her brow into an unhappy frown.

Leelee had told her the whole story. Reirin had been shocked to hear that Kin Seika had plotted to win Gyoumei’s favor by punishing Shu Keigetsu and that she’d used Leelee as means to that end. After all, though the Maiden was quite vocal about her likes and dislikes, as befitting someone with her gorgeous looks, she had never been the type to resort to such underhanded tactics.

I’d always thought of her as a proud, principled artist... Did I misjudge her?

As things stood, Reirin wasn’t feeling too confident in her eye for people. Keigetsu, whom she’d taken for a shy girl, had turned out to be a rather caustic person; Tousetsu, whom she’d thought of as calm and collected, had a hot-blooded side to her; and her cousin, whom she’d always seen as jovial and kind, had glowered at her with ice in his gaze. While she’d kept it to herself, Reirin

was feeling a little disillusioned by her own poor judge of character.

I've been rather naive, haven't I?

Looking back, she had been so preoccupied with keeping herself in shape that she hadn't had all that much interaction with the outside world. Part of that was because the Kou court ladies, Gyomei, and the empress had always stuck to her side like glue, but even discounting that, she'd spent most of her conversations worrying about things like *What if they notice my temperature is running high?* or *Am I going to give them cause for concern and ruin the friendly atmosphere?*

She lowered her hands and stared down at them. This was a healthy body—one that she never had to worry about fainting, and one that wouldn't run short of breath no matter how excited she got. Now that she wasn't exercising as much self-discipline, the rest of her emotions were making up the slack. Earlier that day, she'd even lost her temper for the first time in ages.

Reirin clasped her hands to her chest and let out a sigh.

No, Reirin! This is Lady Keigetsu's body; you mustn't get too attached. Just think how disappointed Her Majesty would be if she saw you like this, she chastised herself, an image of the empress she loved like a mother flashing across her mind.

Both a direct descendant of the Kou clan and Reirin's guardian, Kou Kenshoo was someone the Maiden had looked up to since she was a little girl.

"Welcome, Reirin. I'm not your 'Aunt Kenshoo' anymore. From now on, it's 'Your Majesty' to you," she had said to Reirin on her first day as a Maiden in the Maiden Court, seated upon her throne in the innermost depths of the Palace of the Golden Qilin. There had been a smile in her voice, which was rather deep for a woman. *"I've written all the qualities I'm looking for in a Maiden right here. Take it to heart."*

Trembling with excitement, Reirin had unfurled the scroll that Tousetsu—who was still an attendant of Kenshoo's at the time—had so reverently presented to her. In a generous use of the high-end paper, a single word had been written there in the empress's crisp handwriting:

Backbone.

I still can't forget what shock and emotion I felt in that moment, Reirin thought with a sage nod.

It was said that Pure Consort Kin had chosen Kin Seika as her Maiden for pragmatic reasons, while Noble Consort Shu had chosen Shu Keigetsu out of compassion—but Empress Kenshuu had picked her chronically ill niece to be her successor based on the singular criteria of “backbone.”

For the first time in her life, Reirin had realized there were others in the world who shared the exact same values she had, and she had pledged to her aunt an even deeper respect and allegiance than before.

Anyone who got to know Empress Kenshuu would soon learn that “Nice backbone” was something of a catchphrase for her. When one of her court ladies had succumbed to temptation and stolen a palace furnishing on pure impulse, the empress hadn't hesitated to cut her off despite their long history. On the other hand, when an assassin made it to her chambers through sheer force of will, going so far as to scrape down her own nose to disguise her face, she'd let her go with but a single comment: “Nice backbone.”

When rain had failed to cease for seven nights in a row and her court ladies were growing anxious, she had only gazed at the sky in awe and uttered, “Nice backbone.” When weeds ran rampant around the courtyard, she'd ignore the eunuchs' complaints to say, “Nice backbone.” If you told her the tragic love story of a man whose entire garden came into bloom on the anniversary of his lover's death, she would interpret it like so: “I get it. All the backbone she showed on her deathbed took form, broke through the soil, and burst into bloom.”

Given that the empress prized a strong will and an unyielding spirit above all else, Reirin had to wonder what she would think if she knew her niece had succumbed to the allure of a healthy body and so shamelessly maintained the status quo. Or would she go the other way and praise her for making the most of her unfamiliar circumstances?

No, I need to stop with the self-serving delusions! I'm just—

“Kou Reirin!”

No sooner had she scolded herself than someone seemed to have read her thoughts and shouted her name. “Eek!” she cried out with a startled jump.

When she turned around, she saw that the source of the voice was the one candle burning in the back of the storehouse.

Finding the phenomenon easier to accept the second time around, she walked over to the candle and knelt before it without much ado. “Is that you, Lady Keigetsu?”

“Yeah...”

Whatever rules the spell operated on, it seemed she could get Keigetsu’s name out as long as she was conversing with the girl herself. Reirin began to ponder the mysteries of the Daoist arts, but as soon as she studied the miniature reflection of the other girl’s face in the flame, her brow creased into a frown.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re in a lot of pain.”

“What do you think?”

The girl wearing Reirin’s face was looking terribly haggard. Though her image was tinted with the hue of the flame, it was still clear at a glance that there were dark circles under her eyes, her hair was a disheveled mess, and she was wheezing and clawing at her throat.

“My fever won’t go down...and I can’t...breathe... Do something!” Keigetsu shrieked.

“You can’t breathe?” Concerned, Reirin inclined herself toward the flame. “What happens when you try?”

“What kind of question is that?! I just can’t! I gasp and gasp for air, but all I get is pain!”

“It sounds like you’re on the verge of hyperventilating...”

Quick to form an idea of Keigetsu’s condition despite the lack of detail in her complaints, Reirin took command of the conversation and dove into a series of questions.

“When did the symptoms start?”

"It's been at least half an hour now."

"Have you had anything to eat or drink in the last hour?"

"No..."

"How about a strong bout of fear or anxiety?"

For some reason, Keigetsu fell silent for a moment.

"Yes," she eventually answered through clenched teeth. *"Yes, I have! Obviously! This situation is ridiculous!"*

Determining that it wouldn't be wise to rile her up further, Reirin spoke in a soft, soothing voice. "You're going to be all right, Lady Keigetsu. You aren't exhaling properly, that's all."

"Exhaling?! I just told you I can't breathe in!"

"Your body doesn't realize that you're letting the air go. Come, Lady Keigetsu, try covering your mouth with both hands."

"I'm already suffering, and you want me to stop breathing?!"

"Trust me." Reirin smiled at Keigetsu through the flame. "If you can talk that much, you're going to be fine. Now, cover your mouth. Ready? Breathe out until I tell you to stop."

"I can't—"

"Go on."

Prompted for the third time, Keigetsu grudgingly brought her hands to her mouth and exhaled. Reirin then had her repeat the process of counting to a certain number, breathing out, breathing in, and holding it.

"Have you calmed down a little?"

"..."

"Next, open the top-left drawer of the dresser behind the bed and take out the medicines labeled ten and twenty-one. Both are fine powders. Rub those together between your hands, cover your mouth, and inhale the particles."

Keigetsu had ceased to object to Reirin's instructions. She was probably

starting to feel a bit of relief. Reirin watched as the girl mixed the medicine with an unpracticed hand and breathed the powder in.

“Breathe in...and hold it. One, two, three... Let it go. One, two, three, four...”

Once Keigetsu had inhaled the powder, Reirin went back to coaching her on how to breathe. As soon as she'd confirmed that the number of beats Keigetsu could exhale was getting longer, Reirin left the rest to her patient, instructing her to continue with the exercises until she told her to stop.

“...”

“...”

A hush fell over the candle.

Once she'd managed to get her wits about her, Keigetsu was the first to break the silence.

“What is wrong with your body?”

“Huh?”

“How is it even possible to be this sickly? I’ve yet to see a moment when you are in decent health! It’s insane!”

She sounded less belligerent and more like a pouting child.

Whenever my fevers run particularly high, I always do get a little lonely.

Feeling a touch charmed by the other girl's behavior, Reirin adjusted herself into a more comfortable position beside the candle and carried on with their conversation.

“You’re right. It had always been a part of my life, so I’d never questioned it before. I almost have to envy what tough stuff *your* body is made of; it took me by surprise when we first switched places. It’s all thanks to you that I’m living each day to the fullest now.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?” Keigetsu spat back.

Reirin's eyes went wide in turn. “Huh?”

But thinking about it, perhaps it had been insensitive of her to tell someone suffering from her first fever that *she* was spending her time comfortably. Her

heart ached at the reminder that she was making that frail body of hers someone else's responsibility.

"I-I'm sorry... Um, I've been meaning to ask you this for a while, but are you going to undo our switch any time soon? I know it would go against your plans, but it wouldn't feel right to keep this up," Reirin hesitantly ventured, only to be met with Keigetsu's sharp glare. It seemed the girl had recovered her breathing rate and vitality alike.

"You've got to be kidding me. You think I don't see you trying to work things out in your favor under the guise of altruism?"

"That's not what I—"

"Sure, being sick the whole time means I haven't gotten a full taste of it...but I still love the position I'm in. Everyone waits on me hand and foot, whispers their love to me, and spoils me rotten."

Keigetsu spoke gleefully of how not only the court ladies, but even Gyoumei, the empress, and her would-be nemesis, the Maiden of the Kin clan, had sent her get-well presents.

"Lady Seika did? Erm... You might do well not to accept any gifts from her."

"Hah! Are those sour grapes I hear? Yeah, go on—bemoan how there's no one to pay you a scrap of attention!" Keigetsu dismissed her concerned piece of advice.

"It's really not..." Reirin began, but she was too hesitant to ascribe malice to Seika when she still didn't know what the Maiden was plotting, so she ultimately chose to keep her mouth shut.

Drawing her own conclusions as to why Reirin had trailed off, Keigetsu's lips curled in growing amusement. *"Heh heh! Serves you right. To think I'd see the day when the Kou Reirin envies my fortune! That's it—turn green with envy as I revel in all the spoils! Get used to life as a sewer rat bereft of beauty, talent, or even a scrap of attention!"*

"You shouldn't focus so much on the things you're lacking, Lady Keigetsu. Just look at what a robust body you've been blessed with!"

“Huh?! Even the daughter of a farmer has that. My body doesn’t have any of the skills a Maiden needs. I don’t have good looks, good fortune, or a good pedigree. I don’t have a man to whisper sweet nothings in my ear, a friend I can trust, or a mother to protect me. That’s the problem. My parents never gave me any of the things that matter in life,” Keigetsu declared, the picture of chagrin as she chewed on her nails.

Reirin calmly put a hand to her cheek. “But they gave you such a beautiful name.”

“What?!”

Keigetsu shot Reirin a look of exasperation, but the latter returned it with a smile. Then, after taking a moment to collect her thoughts, she asked, “What wish did you make on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, Lady Keigetsu?”

“Huh?”

Keigetsu was struggling to follow the sudden change in topic. Undeterred by the dubious arch of her brow, Reirin went on, “I spotted two shooting stars, so I made two wishes. One of them was for better health, of course. It’s what I’ve wished for every day of my life, so it popped to mind immediately. There wasn’t a chance I’d be slower on the draw than a star moving through the sky.”

Keigetsu’s eyes widened. She fell silent for a spell but eventually managed a grumpy mumble of *“I guess not.”*

Reirin laughed and nodded. “To tell you the truth, I don’t put much stock in wishes or curses. I’d always regarded the idea of wishing upon a star with a touch of disdain. I didn’t find it realistic.”

People could only save themselves. Hard work was the only thing that could make dreams come true.

Stars shoot through the sky for but a fleeting moment. Any wish one could form in that short a window would have to be something they envisioned for themselves day in and day out. A strong enough desire will shape a person’s mindset. A new mindset will determine a person’s actions. In the end, it wasn’t that stars made dreams come true but that those most willing to achieve their own dreams were the ones wishing upon those stars—or so went her

explanation.

“However.” While the other girl was still reeling from this surprising display of logic, Reirin’s eyes narrowed with a hint of mischief. “On the night of the Double Sevens Festival, a star did indeed bless me with improved health. That, and several other invaluable experiences.”

“Huh...?”

“Shooting stars may not make wishes come true. But this is how I’ve come to see it: Perhaps a comet—that powerful star in no rush to travel across the sky—really does have the power to grant a miracle.”

Then, she looked Keigetsu straight in the eye. “The character for ‘Kei’ in your name is the same one used in the word ‘comet.’ What a majestic and beautiful name. Lady Keigetsu... I feel nothing but the utmost gratitude for you. *You* are my comet.”

Keigetsu said nothing.

She was too overwhelmed.

What...is she talking about?

Her heart was racing. She was flustered by all the emotions coursing through her as fast as the stars had streaked by that night.

That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. Me? A star?

The one to stand at the greatest heights and draw the eyes of the crowd had always been Reirin, the girl likened to the prince’s butterfly. But now that very girl was comparing Keigetsu, the one derided as a ground-hugging rat, to a star that shot across the zenith of the sky. It was such a paradox that Keigetsu had to sneer.

No—she *tried* to sneer. The corners of the mouth she meant to lift instead twisted downward, her brow furrowing. Realizing that she had the look of a child trying not to cry, Keigetsu averted her gaze in a fluster.

Reirin leaned toward the flame, her face set into an earnest expression. “Say, Lady Keigetsu? What would you say to us sitting down and having a

conversation in person? You've told me before that you're seeking revenge against me, but I'm the one getting the better end of this deal. If I've caused you any offense, I'd rather talk it out and apologize than settle it via this switch. If you've been struggling, I can help you resolve—"

"No thanks." Keigetsu unceremoniously cut her off.

The other girl gasped like she'd been wounded, to which Keigetsu responded with the taunting smile she'd meant to wear moments ago.

"Once I'm over this fever, I'll finally get to live the life of my dreams. I'll be loved by everyone, and you'll be hated. We'll see if you're still spouting all that garbage about 'getting the better end of the deal' when the time comes."

She couldn't let herself be fooled. There was no way the girl who had been all but drowning in the affections of others could consider Shu Keigetsu's lot in life to be a good deal. No matter how healthy she was, she was severely lacking in the looks department, and she'd been exiled to a storehouse without a single attendant to serve her. She was the object of everyone's loathing, forbidden to ever reveal the truth of her situation.

Think, Keigetsu! Remember all the suffering you've been through!

Since she was the product of a thoughtless fling, her parents had never even tried to love her, while the rest of her clan had looked unkindly upon her underachieving mother and her failed cultivator of a father. Her parents had shackled themselves in debt and passed on without ever attempting to care for her. To make matters worse, her relatives had not only declined to help out but had even given Keigetsu and her mysterious powers a frosty reception.

Though she'd been adopted by Noble Consort Shu, the one and only person to ever praise her magic as a "wonderful talent," the woman didn't appear interested in providing her an education. She had done nothing but wring her hands and watch Keigetsu's struggles since coming to the Maiden Court.

Disdain. Ridicule. Embarrassment. Neglect. That was all Keigetsu had ever been exposed to.

"Prepare to be mocked by everyone," she declared, as though hoping for it to come true. "If you try to do good, people will cast suspicion on you. If you do

what you must to survive, people will shame you for your audacity. And if you lower your guard, people will have a laugh at your expense.”

Yes. *This* was her true wish.

“*Oh, Lady Keigetsu...*”

“That reminds me: The Ghost Festival is a mere three days away. That’ll mark the end of both the court’s purification rite and your suspension. I bet the other Maidens are going to team up to drag you out of there and pelt you with stones. The Kin clan’s Lady Seika *especially* won’t hesitate to pull something. Why, she’s so eager to climb the ranks sucking up to ‘Reirin’ that she’s been bombarding me with gifts.”

Keigetsu cast a triumphant glance at the incense burner in a corner of the room. It was a high-end item presented to her as a get-well gift from the Kin clan. Of course, she wasn’t dumb enough to view any gift from the Kins as an honest gesture of goodwill. But that was fine. It felt amazing just to see anyone so desperate to win her over.

“I won’t be there, given the shape I’m in. But I’ll make a point of crying to everyone about how *saaad* I am that Shu Keigetsu kept me from attending. When word gets around to His Highness and Lady Seika, who knows what they’ll do to get back at you? Ooh, I can’t *wait* to see that.”

Her breathing was back to normal. Judging by the relief she felt in her joints, there must have been a fever reducer mixed into the medicine she’d taken too.

Determining that she had no more use for Reirin, Keigetsu blew out the candle and took the liberty of ending their conversation.

“Please wai—!”

“Lady Keigetsu!”

Just as she had thrown herself toward the now-extinguished flame of the candle, there came a voice from the doorway. Reirin whipped around.

“Leelee!”

It was none other than her attendant. When Reirin welcomed her back, the

other girl gave an awkward snort and stepped inside the dark storehouse.

“Were you waiting for me, milady? No, no, I needn’t hear any excuses. I could see the light coming through the window. Let me guess: The moment you knew I was coming, you hurried to blow it out?”

Though her sass hadn’t changed, she was at least making an effort to sound more polite. That alone showed how much of her hostility had dissipated, and it was charming how loudly the sentiment of “I’m happy you waited” came through despite her attempts at feigning nonchalance. Reirin couldn’t help but crack a tiny smile.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Oh, nothing. Never mind that—did you return the rice and the hairpin without issue?” Reirin asked what she’d been dying to know, which also happened to make for a convenient change of subject.

“About that...” Leelee mumbled evasively. “No matter how long I waited, Lady Gayou never showed up to our meeting place.”

“Really?”

“It’s possible she’s gone to turn me over to the Eagle Eyes already.”

If the glum tone of her voice was any indication, she was prepared for the worst-case scenario.

Reirin gave that some thought, then shook her head. “If that were the case, that agile captain of the Eagle Eyes would long since have shown up to arrest you. Since I haven’t seen him, there’s a better chance that she decided it was too risky to continue doing business with you.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“I’m sure of it. No doubt word has gotten around the inner court that the captain paid us a visit—and that you were caught brandishing a knife too. Under the circumstances, anyone who comes forward to accuse you of theft might be suspected of having dealings with you. If I were that ivory silk, I would opt to back off here.”

Her calm but firm assertion drew a sigh of obvious relief from Leelee. “Let’s

operate under that assumption, then. I'll follow her example and take this chance to wash my hands of the matter once and—"

"Nonsense!" Reirin interrupted her in a bright voice. "All that means is that you court ladies weren't able to settle your differences. Then this is where your mistresses ought to step up to the plate and set the matter straight!"

"Huh?!" Leelee boggled at the unexpected declaration of war. "Hold on... What are you saying? For starters, how are you supposed to meet with another Maiden while you're still under house arrest?"

"Have you forgotten? The Ghost Festival is coming up in three days, and that's when my suspension will be lifted. If I attend the ceremony, I'll run into Lady Seika there for sure."

"I mean, uhh..."

Shu Keigetsu wasn't much of a performer as it stood. Add to that the lingering suspicions that she had hurt Kou Reirin, and it was hard to imagine that she'd be able to waltz into the ceremony without incident. Even without that, one of the high-ranking court ladies allowed to stand in on the ceremonies had once described Shu Keigetsu's conduct as so boorish that her every step drew a chorus of snickers from the crowd, making it a deeply uncomfortable experience for any Shu present.

"Have you forgotten? Noble Consort Shu said you didn't have to bother attending the ceremony."

"Saying I don't have to go is the same as saying I *can* go."

"Let me give you fair warning here: Given your current position, the high-ranking court ladies are going to be dead set against accompanying you anywhere. A Maiden could hardly show up to an official function without a single attendant."

"That won't be an issue. Three days gives me plenty of time to mend that scarlet robe. Isn't that right, my dearest *senior* court lady?" she replied, brushing aside Leelee's protests as effortlessly as rolling a huge boulder down a bumpy road.

"But, erm... During the Ghost Festival, don't each of the Maidens perform a

dance in prayer of a good harvest? If I'm to be honest here, you're not a very skilled—"

"Leelee." When her attendant continued to press the issue, Reirin silenced her once and for all. "As a Maiden, I won't be able to rest until I get back at whoever laid a hand on my precious court lady."

"..."

Leelee couldn't argue with that.

"Do as you please, then," she relented. "Just don't come crying to me later."

"That's all? This is the part where we're supposed to join hands and give three cheers! Come on, let's do this with a bang!"

"It's too late for that. I'm going to bed," she shot back at her mistress and then lay down upon her makeshift bed of straw.

"You're no fun, Leelee," came the glum murmur from beside her. Leelee turned over, pretending she hadn't heard it.

Without a single flame to light it, the inside of the storehouse was pitch black even before she shut her eyes. But for the first time, Leelee was grateful for that.

Avenging your court lady? Just who are you? Not...that I'm happy about it or anything.

After all, if it had been any brighter in there, surely the other girl would have noticed that her cheeks were red enough to put the blazing scarlet robe to shame.

This was the new Shu Keigetsu—the girl who stepped up to defend and protect Leelee no matter what.

Tears of relief and undeniable joy welling up in her eyes, Leelee scrubbed at her face with the back of her fist.

Chapter 7:

Reirin Prepares

THEN CAME the next morning. Leelee's eyes drifted open as sunlight poured in through the shed window. Her gaze wandered over her surroundings, until at last she registered the figure sitting near the door and snapped awake.

Leaning against the half-open door and basking in the rays of sun that beat down upon her face was none other than her mistress. She was hard at work, the blazing scarlet robe in one hand and a needle in the other. From the looks of it, she'd jumped right into mending the robe she planned to give to Leelee.

As wrong as it was for the mistress to be sewing her attendant's clothes, Leelee couldn't help but gawk at how brightly the Maiden shone as she kept her gaze down and stabbed her needle through the cloth.

Her face had once been set into a permanent glare, but now the faint smile on her lips and the twinkle in her eyes as she stitched were overflowing with tenderness. There was a newfound shine to her hair, which she let tumble over her shoulders in lieu of her usual updo. Come to think of it, she had gone ahead and given herself a trim not long after Leelee had grazed her hair yesterday. Now that the damaged strands had been clipped and the rest of it neatly combed, Leelee finally noticed what rich volume of hair her mistress had been blessed with.

The girl with Shu Keigetsu's face held the robe up to the light with a look of satisfaction, nodded to herself a few times, and picked up her needle once more. Every now and then, a summer breeze would blow through the storehouse, and she'd close her eyes and revel in the sensation. Upon closer inspection, her lips parted ever so slightly each of those times. Leelee couldn't make out the words, but based on the undulating pitch of her voice and the hint of a rhyme to the sound, she was reciting a poem that extolled the beauty of the season.

It's so strange, Leelee thought as she stared at the girl, hiding the sound of

her breathing. *I never imagined I'd find her so beautiful.*

The most that had changed was the length and luster of her hair. Yet her warm, animated countenance and the intellectual air about her made her shine from the inside out.

She had changed. To an astounding degree.

I hope she stays this way forever, Leelee prayed, a soft sigh dropping from her lips. It was then that the other girl looked over, sensing her attendant's presence.

"Oh, Leelee! Good morning. Sorry, did the sunlight wake you?"

"As I've said, there isn't a court lady in the world so irresponsible as to sleep past her mistress," she haltingly replied.

After the irreverent attitude she'd taken with the Maiden, it would've felt weird to start talking like a proper court lady now. On the other hand, she had to pay respect to the one she had acknowledged as her mistress. It was a tough call to make, but in the end, she'd settled on keeping the attitude but watching her language. The Maiden had even laughed and told her, "I like the way you tell it to me straight," so Leelee had opted to take her at her word.

As she mumbled her response and tidied herself up—though given their current living situation, the most she could do was straighten out her clothes and hair—Leelee snuck a glimpse at the robe in the Maiden's hands, only to cry out in surprise. "What?! You're already finished?!"

"Hee hee! I'm all done mending the tears. It looks pretty good, doesn't it?"

To Leelee's great surprise, the robe the Maiden held up before her had been restored to gorgeous condition. There wasn't a single tear or hole to be found, and even the tattered parts she had converted into the lining had been repaired so well that you'd have to be looking for the stitches to see them. Her skill surpassed even that of a professional seamstress, and the sheer amount of work she'd done would have taken Leelee three days to complete.

"How did you get all that done in such a short amount of time? Please tell me you didn't steal a brand-new robe from one of the high-ranking court ladies' chambers."

“Don’t be silly, Leelee. Of course I stitched it up the good old-fashioned way.”

“But I don’t see how it’s even possible to manage that in a few hours!”

Leelee was being persistent enough in her questioning that the Maiden gave an embarrassed shrug of her shoulders and confessed that she’d woken up extra early. “I couldn’t help myself! I was so happy to finally have something to give you. Besides, it’s what you’re going to wear on the big day, right? I was so excited to get started that I got up a little...yes, just a *little* bit early!”

“Uh-huh. And what time did you get up, exactly?” Leelee had to ask, getting a bad feeling about what the answer was going to be.

The girl fell silent for a beat, then oh-so-casually averted her gaze to look out the door. “You know something, Leelee? It’s amazing what range of expression the sky has. I was so moved to witness the slow rearrangement of the stars and moon overhead.”

“Here I was thinking you’d gotten up with the sun, but you haven’t slept at all, have you?”

“There’s nothing quite like that brief moment when night turns to morning—that mystical scene when the earth is tinted in a pale blue light. It’s that moment we leave the long night behind and venture out into a world of light, a spectacle so pure as to be likened to the blue of a baby’s eyes.”

“That’s a very poetic way of describing an all-nighter.”

“Hee hee.” The other girl attempted to laugh it off. “What can I say? I wanted to finish it as soon as possible.”

“What kind of Maiden stays up all night to mend something for her court lady?!” Leelee yelled.

But ever the force to be reckoned with, the Maiden hushed her protests by setting down her needle, holding up the robe, and forcing Leelee to try it on.

“Wai—!”

“Oh, it’s a perfect fit! The bright color of your hair goes wonderfully with the scarlet. I’m so proud to have such a beautiful attendant to accompany me!”

Her innocent joy left Leelee no choice but to shut her mouth. Showered in

effusive praise like “Your arms are so long and beautiful,” “You have such a brilliant complexion,” or “You’re a contender for the most beautiful court lady in the Maiden Court,” and knowing that the Maiden meant every word of it, Leelee worried at her lip in discomfiture. Never once in all her years had she been treated to this much time, effort, love, and praise.

“Please stop.” Leelee cut off the other girl, who was still beaming with stars in her eyes. She looked off to the side—not in irritation but out of embarrassment. She wasn’t used to having such pure emotion directed her way. “There’s no need to make such a fuss over me. I know exactly what I’m worth.”

“Leelee?”

“Yesterday, when I was on my way to the Maiden Court to see Lady Gayou, I passed by a group of blazing scarlets who said, ‘Where is that little rat off to?’ They made a point of calling me scruffy and seedy too. I glared back at them... but if I’m being honest, I know full well that I’m not someone worthy of wearing a blazing scarlet robe.”

The moment she took a step outside the storehouse, the same old torrent of spite had awaited her. Their insults didn’t hit as hard as they had back when she’d stalked off to the storehouse with a dagger in hand, but it still felt like they’d poured cold water on the rush of power she’d felt at the promise of a scarlet robe.

She’d met the requirements to become a middle-ranked court lady upon entering the Maiden Court, so she could understand if she were granted a cinnabar rust robe; however, to jump the ranks to blazing scarlet felt like getting ahead of herself. The high-ranking court ladies who had sneered at her in the cloister may have worn ugly looks on their faces, but they were well dressed, well postured, and smelled so nice she could tell from a distance.

Leelee couldn’t imagine herself standing among them.

“I’m not trying to put myself down. I don’t think I’m any less of a person than those women who form their little cliques and belittle others. But whether I have what it takes to wear blazing scarlet is a different matter. I mean, I’ve never learned how to behave in a manner befitting a high-ranking court lady.”

The more she talked, the more Leelee wanted to slap herself. She’d flustered

at the exaggerated praise, then remembered an unpleasant encounter she'd had the other day. How had that led to her telling such a sob story? And to think she'd forgotten all about those nasty women until only moments ago.

But for some reason...I want to be coddled a little.

She felt like the new Shu Keigetsu would accept her for who she was.

By the time Leelee flicked her gaze upward, the other girl was looking at the floor. She was dabbing at her eyes, so it was impossible to see what sort of face she was making.

"Uh..."

"Did you get back at those women?"

"Huh? Sure, but I ran off after I gave them one last click of the tongue. It's things like that that make me wonder if I'm fit to wear—"

"I see." The next few words out of the Maiden's mouth made Leelee swallow hard. "My apologies, Leelee, but I'll have to ask for that robe back."

Leelee opened her mouth to say something, only to shut it again and nod. She was the one who had brought the whole thing up. It would've been wrong of her to ask to keep it now.

She took her time stripping herself of the robe, then folded it up and handed it over.

"Also, I'll have to cut down on the number of metal threads I give you. I hope you can forgive me."

"Well... Of course," Leelee murmured in response, a bitter cold wind sweeping through her heart.

What had she been thinking? She'd been so sure that her mistress would give her a warm smile and assure her that she deserved to wear the brightest red. She could feel tears of some unidentifiable emotion threatening to prick her eyes.

But then, the Maiden said the very last thing she'd been expecting to hear.

"All right! I'm going to embroider this full of metal threads and make the most

opulent scarlet robe the world has ever seen! Look forward to the finished product!”

“Huh?!” Leelee gawked at her. What had this girl just said? “Wha... Come again?”

“Now that I think about it, it was foolish of me to tailor an ordinary robe for such a grand occasion, one that just so happens to mark your debut as a high-ranking attendant. Court ladies are allowed to wear embroidered robes to formal ceremonies. In that case, it would be a waste not to deck you out from head to toe!”

“What? Hold on a second. All I said was that I wasn’t worthy of a scarlet robe,” the redhead pointed out, her face frozen in confusion.

For reasons that escaped her attendant, the other girl gave a sage shake of her head. “Right. In other words, you want to *become* someone worthy of the color as soon as possible. How wonderful!”

“Huh?!”

“You want a glamorous robe so you won’t be called ‘shabby.’ You want to learn how to conduct yourself in a manner befitting a senior court lady. Your earnest desire is coming through loud and clear! Oh, I never knew you were so ambitious!”

I wasn’t thinking that for a second!

Heedless of Leelee’s consternation, the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face once again dabbed at her eyes, as though moved to tears, and nodded her head vigorously. It seemed her attendant’s little speech had struck a chord with her.

She was so overcome with emotion that she even pulled Leelee into a tight embrace. “I love you so much, Leelee!” she shouted. “What backbone! What an insatiable desire for self-improvement! I’ve never seen a soul so worthy of the highest rank! Let’s both do our best. I’ll support your endeavors with everything I’ve got.”

“Hey, let me—”

“First, let’s work on your posture. It all comes down to breathing right and

strengthening your core. Each morning and evening, you should spend two hours on muscle training. On the respiration front, you ought to switch to diaphragmatic breathing at all times. Next comes memorizing the sutras, practicing your calligraphy, a touch of embroidery work, and then...”

Leelee made a desperate attempt to stop her excited ramblings. “H-hold on a damn second! Why are you running with the assumption that I’m going to be a high-ranking court lady?!”

She’d already forgotten to watch her language.

However, the girl standing before her paid that no mind, merely giving a small tilt of her head. “Hm? But aren’t you my sole cherished court lady?” She said it so naturally and matter-of-factly that Leelee was lost for words. “My number one attendant ought to wear a first-class robe. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No...” Leelee’s cheeks were burning hot. “There’s...not.”

How else was she supposed to respond?

Leelee averted her gaze with a blush across her face. As bubbly as ever, the other girl put a hand to her cheek and murmured, “Oh, how lovely you’d look in gamboge gold...”

Gamboge gold. Leelee looked up at the mention of a color she so rarely heard spoken around the Shu Palace.

Did she misspeak?

It was possible that the orange tint to scarlet had brought the other color to mind and caused the slip of the tongue, but that explanation felt a little forced.

But still...

Gamboge gold is the color worn by the high-ranking court ladies of the Kou clan.

Leelee felt a wave of unease, sensing that this fact might imply something very important—something about her mistress, who had changed into another person overnight.

“What’s wrong, Leelee? You went quiet all of a sudden.”

The redhead opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. “No... It’s nothing.”

It would have been crazy to start imagining something so absurd based on a simple slip of the tongue. She’d misspoken—that was all.

“I was merely shocked at the impracticality of the training schedule you proposed, milady.”

Leelee pretended not to notice the way she’d gone from calling her mistress “Lady Keigetsu” to simply “milady.”

Finding it hard to look the other girl in the eye, she averted her gaze, only to hear a delighted cry of “My!” When she looked up, she saw her mistress staring back at her with sparkling eyes.

“Impractical? You mean my plan would fall short of what you hope to achieve? What a hard worker you are!”

“No, uh, that’s not—”

“Very well. I see now; there’s no need to take it easy on you. We’ll go ahead with the most rigorous schedule I can come up with.”

“Pardon?!”

Having inadvertently lit a fire under her Maiden, Leelee realized too late that she said the wrong thing. The lady sitting before her was accustomed to such a heavy workload that even a full day of weeding, cooking, cleaning, and repairing the storehouse wasn’t enough to tire her out. If Leelee had to follow what *she* considered to be the most rigorous schedule possible, she would almost certainly collapse from exhaustion.

“H-hold on! Let’s think about this rationally! Aren’t *you* supposed to be the star of the ceremony, milady? We’re better off focusing on what *you* have to do to prepare than spending that time on me. You don’t even have anything to wear! Our number one priority should be figuring out how to find you proper clothes!”

“Fear not. In exchange for the blazing scarlet robe, I was thinking I’d take your old pale pink one and recolor it. See this? I gathered up vegetable peels and

flowers for the dyeing and scenting, and I even made a brush out of the hair I cut yesterday!”

“How did a *Maiden* adjust so well to this lifestyle?!”

Unfortunately, her attempts to divert the attention back to her mistress were thwarted by the latter’s unanticipated preparedness.

There was nowhere to run. The way things were headed, her weirdly menacing mistress was going to coach her to the point of a breakdown.

Edging away on pure instinct, Leelee scrambled for an excuse. “But, uh... To have my Maiden spend all her time supervising and instructing me would feel, erm...disgraceful? So perhaps we should reduce the amount of training—”

“Goodness!” The redhead was startled to find her mistress tearing up, at last moved by her pleas. “What a touching sentiment. I understand. In that case, may I ask you to teach me the Sogdian Whirl?”

“Huh?! You think I know such a challenging dance?!”

“No need to be modest! Your mother was a master of the Sogdian Whirl, and you must have watched her dance it many a time, no? Then you ought to remember how it goes. All I need is a rough idea. The dance wouldn’t be suited to this particular occasion, in any case. I’m only looking to expand the breadth of my knowledge. We can take it nice and easy. Okay?”

There wasn’t a crack in the smile on “Shu Keigetsu’s” face. However, the tightness of her grip on Leelee’s hands gave her the same threatening aura of a hound determined to hunt down its prey.

“B-but, erm...”

“Hee hee. I’ll double the training regimen I mentioned earlier, add in a beauty lecture, and top it off with lessons on the Sogdian Whirl. Just thinking of how packed our schedule is going to be has my heart flutter!”

Leelee at last realized that all her attempts to rein her mistress in had backfired completely. Forget about securing herself more time to rest—she’d doubled her workload.

“Come on, let’s do this with a bang!”

Such went the bright and sunny morning three days out from the Ghost Festival.

When he looked through the window left open to capture the night breeze and saw that the waning moon had fallen rather low in the sky, Gyoumei heaved a sigh.

“Let’s call it a night.”

The bureaucrats who’d laid a spread of documents before him said, “Yes, Your Highness.” Then they went about cleaning up the mess in a series of controlled motions.

As he watched the crowd of his competent vassals disperse, Gyoumei rubbed his stiff shoulders. Although he had yet to take the helm of state affairs, the crown prince still had an enormous amount of government work thrust upon him on a daily basis. Now with the Ghost Festival fast approaching, and with what little free time he had going toward his visits to the Kou Palace, he was even more exhausted than usual.

Of course, the fact that staying up a little extra late was all it took for him to knock out such an outrageous workload—which would have had the rest of history’s princes begging for mercy—was itself a testament to Gyoumei’s abilities.

He massaged his brow, which had long been creased in concentration.

“Your Highness,” came the voice of Shin-u, who had stayed behind in the room. Since this particular council had included a final review of the Ghost Festival ceremony only two days away, he had been asked to sit in as the captain of the Eagle Eyes.

“About that incident with the armed court lady in the Shu Palace...” he carefully broached when he was sure the rest of the officials had left the room.

Resting his chin in his hands atop his desk, Gyoumei waved him off. “Enough. I’ve already read the statement. You chose to overlook the matter in light of Shu Keigetsu advocating for her court lady and exhibiting no external injuries. In the Maiden’s own words, the worst that happened was losing a few of her split

ends. That has to be the one of the most pathetic excuses I've seen in years, which made it the most interesting part of the entire report," he declared with a hint of sarcasm. It seemed he still suspected that the whole incident had been an act staged by Shu Keigetsu herself.

"At least she's learned from her previous attempts," he went on. "Rather than cast herself as the victim to garner sympathy, she chose to play the benevolent woman who defends her attacker. But she could have stood to work on her defense a little."

"That's the thing," Shin-u awkwardly began, realizing how it must have come across in writing. "Neither of us Eagle Eyes detected any ill will in Shu Keigetsu's behavior."

Choosing his words carefully, Shin-u thought back to the encounter. Her calm but unwavering defense of her court lady. How naturally her hand had gone to the girl's back. The woman he'd seen in that storehouse had been dignified yet compassionate, a Maiden among Maidens.

"It's true that Shu Keigetsu was once a wicked woman. But it's also true that she's trying to change. We've seen it for ourselves."

Whenever he remembered how straight and tall she'd stood, an emotion Shin-u couldn't put a name to rippled through his heart. Marveling at the unfamiliar sensation, he went on, "Perhaps it's time to reconsider your attitude toward her, Your Highness. She looked like a virtuous woman to me. At the very least, she didn't seem the sort to pull such dirty tricks. Nor did she seem shallow enough to salivate over any scraps of sympathy thrown her way. By that argument, the fact that Kou Reirin has taken no issue with your regular visits despite your busy schedule seems much more—"

"Shin-u." Gyoumei stopped him in an ice-cold voice.

Realizing that he had clearly overstepped his bounds, Shin-u held his tongue.

This is exactly why I hate public speaking.

It would have been one thing to deliver a cut-and-dry account of the facts, but to insert his personal thoughts and attempt to influence another's opinion had proved too difficult a task for a poor speaker like Shin-u. His emotions didn't run

high all that often, which meant he didn't know how to express himself when he did feel that rare surge of sentiment. He regretted that in his desperation to defend Shu Keigetsu, he had been foolish enough to malign Kou Reirin and provoke Gyoumei's wrath.

"Do I understand your point correctly, Shin-u? Shu Keigetsu has changed. Sure, she's abused her court ladies, framed the eunuchs, toadied to authority, refused to put in the effort to compensate her lack of skill, thrown tantrums behind the scenes, disparaged another Maiden, and pushed her out of the pagoda in an attempted murder, but *at least* she stood up for a single court lady."

"..."

"And right in front of the influential captain of the Eagle Eyes, no less. In what could be considered an imitation of Reirin. I *told* her that the next time I witnessed one of her cheap mimicries, I'd have her head."

All he'd managed to do was add fuel to the fire.

When Shin-u furrowed his brow, Gyoumei regained enough of his composure to exhale a small sigh. "Sorry. I went too far. Losing my temper as soon as Reirin enters the discussion is a bad habit of mine. I'll concede to that.

"However," he went on in spite of the awkward frown on his face. "Try to understand where I'm coming from, Shin-u. The first woman I've ever held dear was nearly killed before my eyes. Though I know I must abide by the verdict of the trial and believe in her chance of rehabilitation, each time I see Reirin too sick to leave her bed, my heart burns with hatred for Shu Keigetsu. To tell the truth, it's taking all my willpower not to go decapitate her on the spot."

Shin-u didn't doubt that. Given his standing as the crown prince, he would be within his rights to execute whatever Maiden incurred his displeasure by the end of the day. That he hadn't gone against the ruling of the Lion's Judgment to have Keigetsu banished could be considered a reflection of his integrity.

"I know that my daily visits to Reirin are getting to be excessive. But the fault lies with me, not her. She's being more open with me than ever before. As I've mentioned, that makes me happy—and at the same time, too scared to tear my eyes from her."

“Scared? Of what?”

“Scared to think that a girl as strong-willed as her has been pushed to that point. Whenever I see her looking so helpless, I can’t help but think back to when she disappeared over the balustrade that night.”

Gyoumei buried his face into the palm of his hand, ashamed of himself. He knew on some level that Reirin was acting uncharacteristically spoiled and that he was going to see her too often. All the same, he couldn’t help but put his every thought toward her safety. He was more concerned with examining her temperature and breathing rate than her attitude or words.

“Please don’t ask me to show Shu Keigetsu kindness right now. I don’t have the room in my heart for that.”

Shin-u sensed inner conflict in the low undertone of his voice. Gyoumei likewise wasn’t the sort to get attached to other people, though in a different way than Shin-u. He must have realized exactly how shaken he was, and that knowledge must have frustrated him.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

In the end, Shin-u made the choice to back down.

The moon outside the window neither smiled like a crescent nor shone down upon the earth in its full glory. It simply hung in the sky, an incomplete shadow of its former self.

Chapter 8:

Reirin Dances

HOW VERY DULL.

It was the day of the Ghost Festival.

Kin Seika gave a subtle sigh behind her fan as she watched the members of the other clans file into the Maiden Court.

Not a sight worth seeing here. What a waste of my time.

Scrunching her shapely eyebrows into a scowl, she gave a small tilt of her head. Her gaze traveled down to her own well-manicured nails. Their polish made for a more impressive sight than anything the rest of the mediocre Maidens had to offer.

Tasked with the production and control of gold coin since ancient times, the Kin clan sat at the helm of Ei's economy—a family of merchants, so to speak. But at the same time, the clan had cultivated a heritage of fine crafts like goldwork, and its descendants had long self-identified as patrons of the arts.

Perhaps owing to that livelihood of theirs, many of the members of the Kin clan had eccentric personalities. Most of them could be divided into one of two extremes: the pragmatic merchant type or the proud artist type. Seika was the latter.

Such types strove for aesthetic perfection in everything they did. They endeavored to hold their heads high, act according to a consistent philosophy, and above all else, to please the eye. Curiously enough, their pursuit of these ideals sometimes wrought greater success than the rational assessments of the merchants. Thus, although the two sides were perpetually at odds with one another, the end result was that the two lines balanced out each other's shortcomings to ensure the prosperity of the clan. For the most part, the artistic mainline descendants dictated the clan's long-term visions, while the more practical vassals implemented those through short-term measures.

Being of strong mainline descent, Seika had been born into the world with both gorgeous, eye-catching good looks and a hardline stance on beauty that could come off as almost fickle. As far as she was concerned, the unpicturesque had all the worth of dust floating in the air.

There were but two people in the whole of the Maiden Court who had managed to capture her heart. One was Ei Gyomei, the crown prince with a radiance so powerful as to be called the ultimate form of yang qi. The other was Kou Reirin, the so-called butterfly whose beauty was as delicate as goldwork swaying in the wind.

Seika was well aware of what gorgeous features she possessed, but even she was no match for Kou Reirin's translucent brand of beauty, which stole the breath and drew the reverential touch of all who beheld it. Moreover, underneath her tranquil demeanor lay a staunch, formidable will. It was that, among other things, that had won her Seika's respect.

Seika foresaw a future in which Kou Reirin would become the empress, she would bring the four consorts together as Noble Consort Kin, and together, the two of them would work to support Gyomei.

Or at least she *had*.

Curse you, Shu Keigetsu! I should have exterminated that sneaky, treacherous sewer rat a long time ago!

All of her plans had been thrown into disarray when the impudent Shu Keigetsu had shoved Kou Reirin from the pagoda. A celebration devoted to honoring the Great Ancestor and praying for a bountiful harvest, the Ghost Festival was considered the domain of the Kin clan, the sovereigns of autumn. She and Pure Consort Kin had come up with all sorts of elaborate plans for the event, only to have their preparations interrupted by the purification rite and find themselves forced to scale back.

Most unforgivable of all was that Kou Reirin had been bedridden since her fall from the tower and was going to be absent from the day's festivities. The other Maidens had all the skill of monkeys showing off a few tricks. The only dances worthy of Gyomei's audience would be hers and Reirin's. Being a master of dance herself, Seika had been looking forward to seeing the other girl's graceful

moves upon the stage.

Even combined, the dances of that sullen Gen woman or the Ran clan's little squirrel couldn't hope to make up for the loss. And that shameless Shu Keigetsu's bumbling efforts are worse than a monkey's tricks—they're nothing but an eyesore.

Seika hated Keigetsu. The girl was in constant search of attention despite her own dearth of talent, and she'd glower in envy at whoever *did* manage to draw a bit of interest. Whenever faced with someone in a more vulnerable position than herself, she'd go right to screeching at the top of her lungs and tormenting them. She was the definition of insidious.

That reminded her that one of the Kin clan court ladies had suspected a Shu of stealing her ornamental hairpin. That sneaky sort of thievery was so typical of Shu Keigetsu. Seika heaved a sigh of disgust.

I'd always thought it boorish to waste time on those I despise, but I can't abide by this any longer. I'm going to make you so miserable that you'll regret not leaving the Maiden Court when you had the chance.

In the Ghost Festival ceremony, each Maiden performed a dance in hopes of a good harvest. It was custom for the audience to toss a precious stone to the performers who did well.

This time around, Seika had suggested that, in addition to said tradition, those who danced the worst were to be sprinkled in spring water. Ritual dances were an offering to the heavens. She had insisted that a disgraceful dance might serve to tarnish the divine and thus had to be purified by the hands of men. Meanwhile, she had used the excuse of “the more people to offer their prayers, the better” to allow even the eunuchs and middle-ranked court ladies to participate. Needless to say, they too had been granted the right to spray the dancers with water.

There was going to be drinking involved. Though the idea was for the water to be “sprinkled,” no doubt a few people would slip up and spill their entire jug. Some might even be tipsy enough to chuck their liquor bottles or splash muddy water on the stage, but it was the organizer's prerogative to turn a blind eye to a little rowdiness.

Shu Keigetsu was the only appallingly bad dancer. Seika couldn't have cared less if she was drenched in mud or if her face was cut by a flying pottery shard. There wasn't a woman in the world with a fouler nature than her.

As she glanced around the stage, she observed the excited whisperings of the Maidens and consorts who hadn't seen each other for a week, as well as the court ladies and eunuchs who had been permitted to attend their very first ceremony. Each spectator had their fair share of pent-up frustration after being forced to hole up at home due to the sudden purification rite. No doubt they would all be taking it out on Shu Keigetsu. That was bound to prove the one and only highlight of the boring ritual.

Go on! Show yourself, Shu Keigetsu!

Since she had no interest in dancing upon a tarnished stage, Seika had set Shu Keigetsu to go last. Accordingly, she would also be the final one to arrive at the Maiden Court.

Thinking about how the wretched Maiden was going to show up with her shoulders hunched and not a single court lady by her side, Seika smiled and watched the entrance to the court.

"Say, Shin-u. What sort of face do you imagine she'll be making when she arrives?" Gyoumei asked the man standing beside him as he watched the Maidens file into the court.

In the Maiden Court, only the emperor-to-be and his prospective consorts were allowed to take center stage. Although this was an official court ceremony, the emperor was not in attendance, and it was strictly in their capacity as guardians that the empress and four consorts were seated a short distance from the stage.

Thus, it was Gyoumei who was seated upon the raised platform closest to the action. As he drew a deliberate sip from his cup of liquor, he decided to strike up a conversation with his trusted half brother.

The wine was high-grade and had a strong rice flavor, and the gorgeous stage had been modeled after a mountain dressed in autumn leaves. The Kin clan's

strong preferences shone through amid the several bold touches that preempted the season. Shin-u stole a glance at Gyoumei, who was swirling the cup in his hand and savoring the alcohol's aroma, then turned his eyes forward once more.

"By 'she,' do you mean Shu Keigetsu?"

"Who else would I mean? Yes, the same shameless woman who, despite her innocent verdict at the Lion's Judgment, has faced so much suspicion and antagonism from the court that her guardian dissuaded her from attending. She insisted on showing up regardless. Aren't you curious what a Maiden like her, who has not a scrap of talent for song or dance, will be thinking as she shows her face here?"

His tone was a casual one, and he even gave an amused shrug of his shoulders, but Shin-u had known Gyoumei long enough to tell that he was quite irritated. A mere handful of days ago, he had been loath to even hear mention of Shu Keigetsu, and now he was bringing her up of his own accord.

"Are you angry about something?"

"When I went to see her this morning, Reirin was crying," Gyoumei answered darkly, a scowl overtaking his features. "She told me that she wanted to attend the ceremony. That she wanted to please me with her dance. It was the first time I've ever seen that strong-willed girl shed tears."

"Is that so?" Shin-u simply nodded along.

He was well aware of his half brother's commitment to Kou Reirin. From Shin-u's point of view, a woman's tears were nothing to get worked up about, but given the current situation and what had led up to this point, he sympathized with Gyoumei's anger to an extent. As the crown prince, he was entitled to do whatever he pleased; the very fact that he had refrained from saddling Shu Keigetsu with an additional punishment and had allowed her to show up to the ceremony at all showed a lot of restraint.

"Please refrain from beheading her onstage. I imagine those neat freak Kins would be quite displeased."

Shin-u had meant to sound matter-of-fact and betray as little emotion as

possible, but given Gyoumei's grimace, the prince seemed to have taken that comment as a slight. "I'm not *that* shortsighted. I just wanted to get all the unpleasant feelings that have been nagging at me off my chest."

He avoided Shin-u's gaze by staring down at his wine. His heart was as rattled as the liquor rippling in his cup. That was, of course, the result of seeing his beloved cry. His overflowing love for Reirin had driven him to righteous indignation.

Or at least...that's what it *should* have been.

My Kou blood fights to protect those I've allowed into my inner circle. It's only natural to be shaken with rage upon seeing the woman I love cling to me with swollen, red eyes. But...

Gyoumei thought back to that morning. Right before the ceremony began, he had carved out just enough free time to go visit Reirin in her room.

In the past, she had often seemed to worry that whatever afflicted her might be contagious. No matter how casually Gyoumei had conversed with her, she had always been sure to maintain a subtle distance. Whereas these last few days, she had made a habit of nuzzling her cheek against his chest.

Though he'd felt a surge of affection to think that she was feeling forlorn enough to seek out his touch, that morning she had broken down sobbing and clung to Gyoumei with an air of desperation.

"Oh, I'm heartbroken! I worked so hard thinking of nothing but pleasing you—of nothing but winning your affections!"

Likely because she'd been lying down in bed until moments earlier, her hair had been disheveled, and her eyes had been red and shrouded with tears.

When she looked up at him with those eyes of hers, Gyoumei had caught himself wondering: *Is this really the Kou Reirin I fell in love with?*

She was Gyoumei's beloved butterfly. She looked fragile on the outside, but she had a strong backbone. Was she the sort to use someone else as a crutch?

Gyoumei had never seen her cry until now. Hence he had no reference for comparison, but she had never struck him as the type to weep so openly—the

type to salivate over any scraps of sympathy thrown her way.

The same words Shin-u had said to him the other day echoed in his mind.

Blast it! I told him off for the very thing I'm thinking now. Pathetic.

The prince tightened his grip on his cup and shook off those stray thoughts. He was ashamed to be having doubts about the woman he loved more than anyone else.

It was only natural to grow disheartened in times of illness. Let alone when she was suffering a long-lasting fever on the heels of a near-death experience. It wasn't strange that she'd be acting a little differently from usual. How shameful it would be to love her only for her smile and forsake her the moment she showed a bit of weakness.

Reirin is the only woman I've ever allowed into my circle.

For Gyoumei, who had never known women to do anything but flirt or cozy up to him, Reirin was the first to gaze back at him with calm dignity. She was his beloved, a slender but proud girl who was always doing something to defy his rational expectations.

She's the only one I've ever allowed to take residence in my heart, he told himself again.

"Your Highness. The Maiden of the Ran clan has made her entrance. Next up is your number one concern, Shu Keigetsu," Shin-u whispered from beside him. "It would seem she only managed to secure herself a single atten—"

He stopped his report mid-sentence. Incredulous, Gyoumei turned to look at the entrance.

Despite her ostentatious choice of robes, Shu Keigetsu had always carried herself with her large figure curled into a sorry-looking ball. Now that she lacked even decent clothes to wear, would she show up reduced to tears before the event had even begun?

"Ah...!"

However, the moment he saw her walk into the room where the stage had been set, Gyoumei's breath caught in his throat.

My, my.

As she looked out over the room thronged with eunuchs and court ladies, Reirin's eyes widened a touch. Since the Kin clan was hosting the event, she had expected it to be a glamorous affair, but she hadn't anticipated such a large turnout. The whole atrium was packed with people, only the raised platform of the stage clear of spectators.

When she realized that the crowd's buzz had died down upon her entrance, the onlookers pausing their chatter to stare at her slack-jawed, a faint smile rose to Reirin's face.

Hee hee. I know! I have the prettiest court lady ever, don't I?

Naturally, this tickled her maternal...or rather, her *mistressly* instincts.

Leelee, her high-ranking attendant, was dressed in her blazing scarlet robe. All the tears in the fabric had been painstakingly mended—the needles and scissors from her “pranks” had been a big help on that front—and it had been embroidered with the metal threads to hide the seams. Reirin was proud to have kept her word of designing Leelee the most opulent court lady uniform in history while still preserving its prestigious scarlet color.

What's more, Leelee had spent the last three days getting a crash course on everything from where to aim her gaze to how to tie her hair. Combined with her deep scarlet robe, she genuinely looked the part of an elegant, high-ranking court lady. When Reirin overheard the redhead walking behind her mumble, “Chest out, gaze forward,” her smile grew even wider.

She had made for a truly excellent student.

I wasn't slacking off either, of course.

The point of attending the event was to intimidate the woman who had threatened Leelee. As her mistress, Reirin couldn't afford to cut corners. She cast a quick glance down at the robe she was wearing.

It was Leelee's old pale pink robe, which she had taken in exchange for the scarlet one. She'd taken advantage of the washed-out color of the original to

dye the garment with flower and vegetable juices, then embroidered it with the leftover gold threads, resulting in one very glamorous garment. Reirin was quite proud of her handiwork; though its color was on the muted side, it twinkled in the sunlight pouring down from the heavens.

I've spent these last three days immersed day and night in my favorite hobby of embroidery and devoted to making all sorts of little tweaks to my appearance. Oh, how productive I've been!

She exhaled a spellbound sigh as she reflected on the lead-up to this moment. It was hard to describe her circumstances as anything less than perfect: no one to fret over her, never wanting for energy, and able to partake in the things she loved as much as her heart desired.

Now that she'd already lost a chunk of her hair, she had taken the chance to even out the ends and comb it with nut oil. Thanks to those efforts, her previously limp and wavy locks now had a glossy sheen to them.

Her skin was aglow from her regular gourd regimen, and its robustness meant she could apply whatever cosmetics she so desired. She'd shaped her eyebrows and painted her lips in red. By daring to accentuate the corners of her fierce, upturned eyes with vermillion and thickening her eyelashes with the ink of the smut rice, she had managed to give them a more slender appearance. It gave her a look as striking as the summer sun, and whenever she lowered her gaze, the result was a heart-throbbingly seductive smile.

However, she had gone light on the face powder. With the added help of a little rouge, she'd used only as much as she needed to conceal her freckles, thus giving her the look of clear, healthy skin. After all the time she'd spent training in how to apply natural-looking makeup to hide that her face was flushed with fever or pale with chills, it had been a piece of cake.

Plus, Lady Keigetsu's skin never dries out! No matter how many layers of rouge I put on!

She was wheezing with an emotion akin to pride. Reirin's all-around weak constitution had forced her to work with limited materials to hide her complexion, but it was different for Keigetsu. In truth, Reirin had long been dying to try out more mature cosmetics like multilayered rouge. She was

thrilled to see that wish of hers granted.

No! Bad Reirin! Lady Keigetsu wanted me to suffer during the Ghost Festival, so I mustn't spoil her plans by getting all giddy! she hastily admonished herself when she started to get carried away.

Tucking in her chin, she looked out over those present. Gyoumei occupied the highest seat along one side of the rectangular stage. In the back were the Maidens' guardians, the four consorts, and the empress. The ailing "Kou Reirin" and her court ladies were absent, while the other three Maidens and their attendants were each seated around one of the remaining sides of the stage. There was no spot reserved for the Shu clan's party of two.

It was a blatant show of antagonism from Kin Seika, who should have been responsible for assigning them a seat.

Reirin strode gracefully into the room, then stopped to look at Seika. "Hello, Lady Seika. I don't see a seat for me or my court lady."

Seika sucked in a breath as she stared back, but she soon blinked herself to her senses and smiled. "My deepest apologies. I heard that Noble Consort Shu recommended you not attend, and I never imagined you'd be so brazen as to disregard her advice. Given what tough skin you seem to have, why not take a seat on the floor?"

It was an outright attack. However, though the captain of the Eagle Eyes scowled, no one present admonished Seika for her behavior. Even Gyoumei, an advocate of fairness for all, seemed to be weighing his options of how to react.

Or...not quite. The truth of the matter was that his shock over "Shu Keigetsu's" transformation had made him slow on the draw.

What's going on here?

Gyoumei stared out at Kin Seika's belligerent smile and the Shu clan Maiden who took it with grace. Sure, he'd known from the Lion's Judgment and Shin-u's report that she had changed. But *this*? She was like an entirely different person.

Her features were sharp and well defined. Her hair was sleek and beautifully coiffed despite her sure lack of an attendant who specialized in hairdressing. Unlike her usual attire, her garment wasn't so gaudy as to take on a life of its

own. Instead, it highlighted her own surprisingly gorgeous looks, and her minimal number of accessories served to emphasize the smoothness of her skin.

But most notable of all was the look of self-possession and intelligence in her gaze. The graceful but flawless way that she carried herself. Her bearing betrayed a strength of will that made Gyomei's heart thump in his chest.

"My... 'Tough,' am I? You flatter me," the Shu Maiden's elegant voice rang out after a few beats of silence had settled over the room. She brought both hands to her chest as though somehow touched by the words.

It was then that Gyomei chose to speak up. As the crown prince, he thought it his duty to stand up for the Maiden who was dealing with this act of outright aggression so admirably. No matter if she was someone he couldn't stand.

"Kin Seika. Though her attendance was unaccounted for, it would be a good demonstration of the Kin clan's skills to receive her with grace. It can't be that hard to make space for two women. Bring her a floor chair at once."

"I appreciate your concern, Your Highness, but I'll be fine right here."

Yet the Maiden in question rejected his assistance without a second thought.

"What?" said Gyomei.

"Pardon?" said Seika.

Heedless of the blank stares the pair were shooting her, she took her seat atop the hard floor a short distance from the stage. What's more, she didn't do it with the sad sag of a victim; she looked perfectly happy about this turn of events.

As it happened, the Maiden and her court lady were caught up in their own whispered exchange.

"Milady... This is nothing to be smiling about."

"I can't help it, Leelee... Hee hee hee..."

It was the first time Reirin had ever been praised as "tough." She knew full well that the comment was meant to be snide, but that didn't make her any less happy to hear it. She even felt an ineffable sense of accomplishment. Add to

this the fact that Reirin preferred the hard feel of the floor to the squish of a padded chair, and she was overall quite pleased with this development.

The crowd buzzed when “Shu Keigetsu” didn’t so much as raise a protest. Seika, too, narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

However, Reirin let it all pass over her like a gentle spring breeze. Malice. Distrust. Looks of disbelief. All of those were nothing more than “harbingers” of harm. She had no desire to waste her energy feeling hurt before she’d suffered any tangible damage.

That is, so long as none of it was directed at her loved ones.

Our goal here is to return this silver hairpin to Lady Seika, Reirin thought, touching the accessory she had hidden in the breast of her garment.

It was tradition to offer jewelry to the girls who danced well, and knowing Seika, that would provide the perfect opportunity to hand it back to her. What Reirin did from there would depend on how Seika reacted to seeing the hairpin.

“Now, what sort of ceremony will this turn out to be?” Reirin murmured as she waited for the starting signal.

What’s going on? Seika asked herself, hiding her scowl behind her round fan.

It went without saying that the source of her dismay was Shu Keigetsu, who was seated quietly on the floor not too far from the stage. Or to be more precise, it was how much the girl had changed.

It was as though an ugly caterpillar had suddenly transformed into a butterfly. The way she sat up straight and pulled in her chin as she looked out over the stage made her look like the master of the venue.

Was she always this beautiful? Seika’s frown deepened.

Her glossy raven hair. Her clear-cut features. Though there were traces of the old Shu Keigetsu in her, the dignity in her bearing made her come off as a completely different person.

Had she always been that tall? And not in a gangly way either—her whole figure was exuding a lithe grace. Much like the Shu clan’s signature season, she

was airy and invigorating; yet whenever she lowered her gaze, there was an indescribable tinge of allure to her eyes.

And she's completely unfazed by my taunts.

That was the most disconcerting part of it all. Any Maiden who had spent the last year with her would know that Shu Keigetsu was a walking inferiority complex. She shut down when she was nervous, and she'd raise all hell when her emotions got out of hand. Despite the malice coming at her from all directions, not to mention Seika's out-and-out verbal assault, she was still smiling serenely—and that wasn't the kind of person she had ever been.

Seika pondered the mystery for a while, until she eventually banished those thoughts with a light shake of her head. As the organizer of this event, she couldn't afford to neglect the proceedings. As she shifted her attention with a light tap of her fan, a smile rose to her face. She sensed that the faint sound and the gorgeous curve of her lips had brought the rest of the crowd back to reality.

Watching Shu Keigetsu out of the corner of her eye, Seika smoothly moved things along. "Now that we're all here, shall we begin the Ghost Festival ceremony?"

First came a speech from Gyomei, then the whole audience recited a prayer to the heavens and the Great Ancestor. The sacred treasures of the sword and bow were adorned with five-colored threads, a cup was passed around from person to person to cleanse their mouths with water, and then it was at last time for the ceremony's main event: the dance of offering.

The one set to perform first was the Maiden of the Gen clan, Gen Kasui. She was the oldest of the Maidens at nineteen. She had snow-white skin, a slender build, and a visage as shapely as a snow fairy, but her lack of facial expressions and reticence conveyed a gloomy nature, making her someone Seika preferred to avoid. Nonetheless, she was the sort to pull off any task with ease, which made her the perfect choice for an inoffensive starting act.

"May the goddess of fertility smile upon us in the coming autumn days."

In practice, as befitting the natural-born combatants of the Gen clan, Kasui performed her dance without incident, skillfully wielding the *khakkhara* staff in prayer of a bountiful harvest.

I'd say the harsh rattle of the bells makes it sound more like a weapon than a musical instrument.

Though she'd regarded that performance with a cold raise of the eyebrow on the inside, Seika bestowed a gem of jade upon the stage. Gyomei gave her a crystal and the consorts gave her pearls, while the Maiden of the Ran clan offered her a beautiful fan bedecked in feathers. The court ladies and eunuchs rewarded her dance with applause instead of jewelry.

Seika stole a glimpse at Shu Keigetsu, curious what she could manage after being driven off to a storehouse with none of her belongings, and lo, she had presented a scented ornamental ball. Normally those were an early summertime craft, but that made it all the more appropriate coming from the Shu clan's Maiden, and it was nonetheless a gorgeous and detailed work of art embroidered with gold and silver threads. The moment Kasui picked it up, her eyes went wide and she broke into a rare smile, which suggested that the fragrance she had sewn inside was also a top-notch article.

A stir swept through the crowd upon seeing that Shu Keigetsu, the walking definition of dull and inconsiderate, had prepared such a tasteful gift.

The next dance was from the Maiden of the Ran clan, Ran Houshun. She was the youngest of the Maidens at thirteen years old. She was a beautiful girl with a petite stature, adorable round eyes, and a timid and unassuming demeanor that triggered the protective instincts of those around her. But as far as Seika was concerned, Ran Houshun's daintiness and innocence were like the leftover dregs of a Kou Reirin stripped of her nobility, which made her opinion of the girl a more scathing one. Metal chops wood. Incompatible from the outset, the two Maidens had no deeper a bond than that of a terrorizer and the terrorized.

"Um... May the goddess of fertility...smile upon us in the coming autumn days..."

Houshun squeaked out the line that signaled the start of the dance, then drew her lips together and lifted her face, holding the *khakkhara* that rivaled her own height. It was precious to watch the nimble motions of her tiny arms and legs as she danced. There was no doubt in her movements, which showed that she must have practiced quite a bit.

As soon as her dance was over, Seika and each of the other participants awarded her the same prizes as the previous round. The ceremony was turning out to be a more peaceful affair than anticipated.

Next up was Seika's turn.

"May the goddess of fertility smile upon us in the coming autumn days."

Upon giving the bells on the staff a decisive jingle, she began to glide atop the stage. Seika gazed calmly upon the spectators as they gaped in wonder. Her dance had a certain flourish to it. Making full use of her feminine, curvaceous physique, she drew the eyes of the crowd with her playful moves in time to the beat.

Seika prided herself on how the ease of her dance betrayed none of the rigors of her training. When she cast a coquettish glance over the audience between songs, she saw that the Kin clan court ladies were swelling with pride and even the eunuchs' cheeks were flushed in awe. Gyomei and the four consorts were sitting up straight in their seats, reflecting the intensity with which they watched her.

That's what I like to see.

The thrill of establishing herself as beauty incarnate brought an exceptionally gorgeous smile to Seika's face.

When she finished her dance, a touch out of breath, Gyomei even personally praised her performance as "splendid." The crystal he presented to her had a gold-plated pedestal in the shape of a bird; it was much fancier than the ones he had given to the other two Maidens. The round of applause she received from the audience was also the loudest so far.

"Thank you very much. I'm honored to receive such lavish gifts," Seika replied with an air of charm, then cast a glance at Shu Keigetsu. Her dance called for more than the same ball that had been presented to the other two clans. These favors were a contest of wealth; it was a test to see what class of goods the Maidens could procure without falling back on their guardians. To award the dance that had earned the prince's recognition with a mere ornamental ball would be a grave insult.

Seika narrowed her gaze, wondering what the girl could manage now that she had been cut off by Noble Consort Shu, only to be met with an unexpected present.

“That was beautiful. Though it’s but a modest trinket before a dance sure to please the goddess of fertility, please accept this gift of mine.”

Lo, it was a beautiful hairpin wrought in silver and pearls.

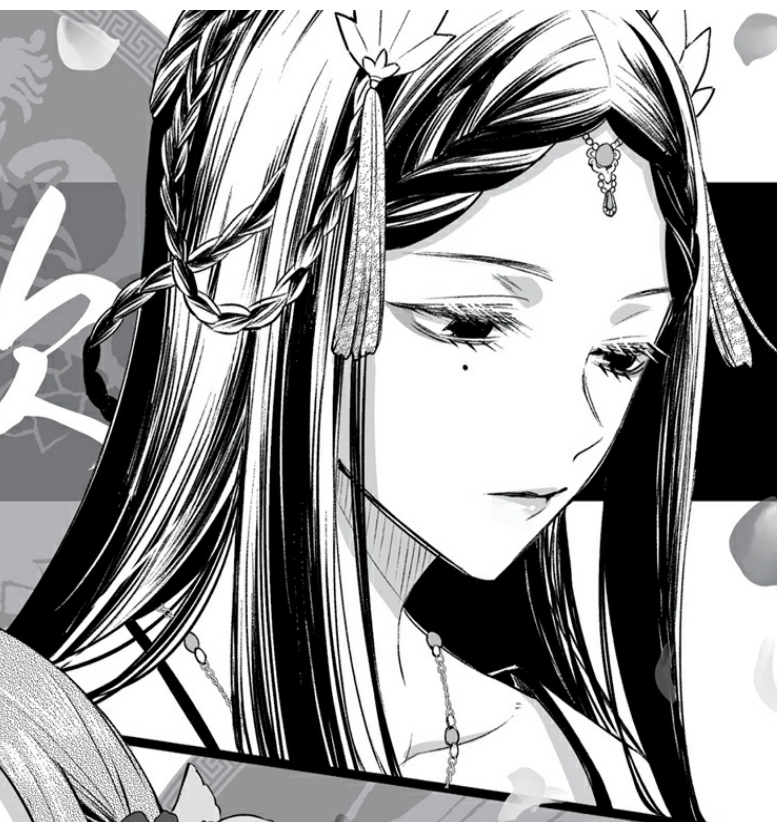
This first-class item thrust before her, Seika lapsed into wide-eyed silence.

What will you do, Lady Kin Seika? Leelee wondered, rigid with tension as she watched Shu Keigetsu and Kin Seika stare each other down.

Amid the stares of the crowd, her mistress wore an unperturbed smile.

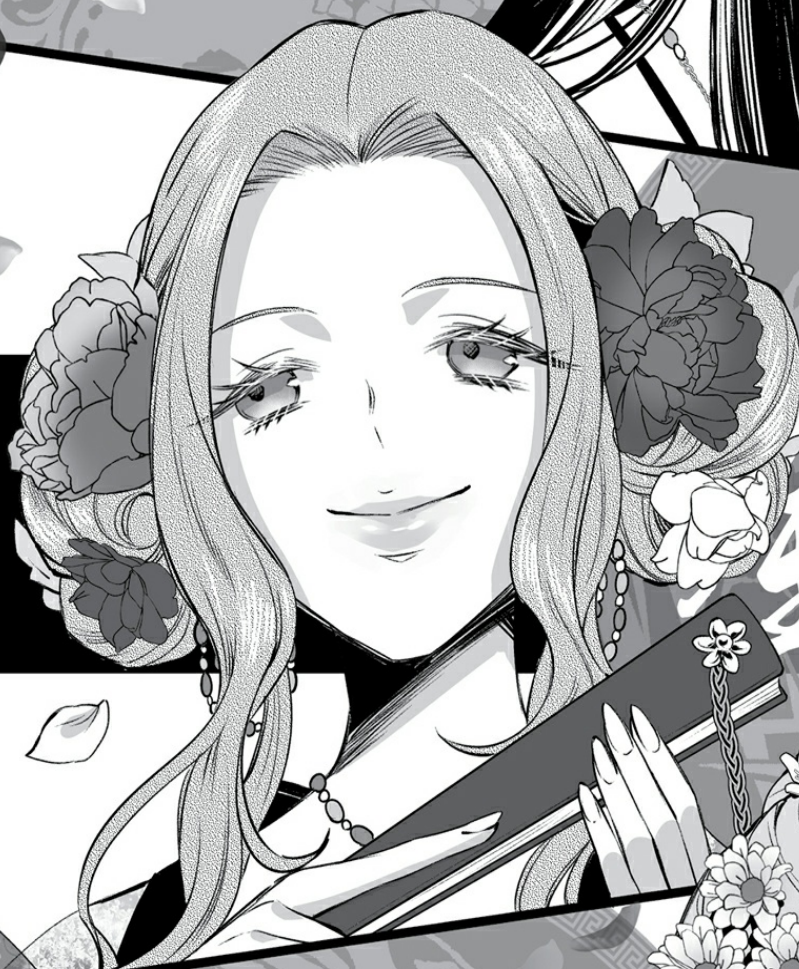
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Gen Kasui



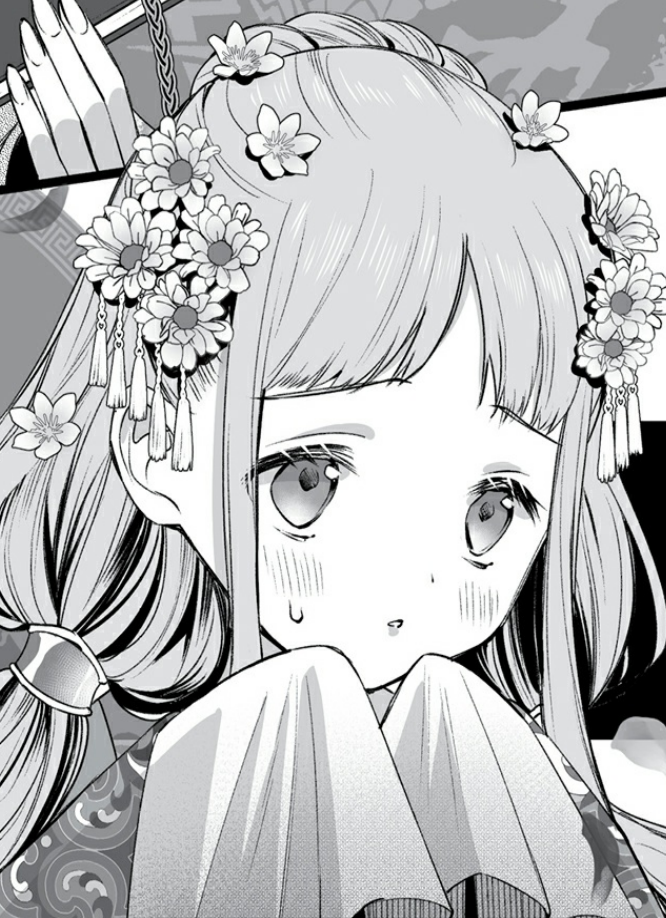
Kin Seika

金歌生



藍芳春

Ran Houshun



“How about it? I trust an exemplary Maiden with a heart no less bountiful than the goddess of fertility to accept this humble offering without complaint.”

To make matters worse, she was even driving her point home with a smile; Leelee’s face stiffened at the sight of it.

Yeah, I hear you. In other words, “If you want to prove your measure as a mistress, you’ll take the blackmail material back without a peep.”

Though her mistress’s demeanor was as graceful as ever, Leelee broke into a cold sweat as the girl brazenly pressed the matter.

All told, this was fairly tame as far as potential solutions went. For instance, during a hard-earned moment of downtime on their first day of training, the girl with Shu Keigetsu’s face had looked wistfully upon the aphids crawling over the grass and asked, “Say, Leelee. How should I deal with the aphids that have ravaged my precious garden? Should I drown them in water? Or boiling oil? Or perhaps I ought to get the job done with my own two hands. Which method sounds best to you?”

“Uh... We *are* still talking about aphids, right?”

“Hee hee!”

The beautiful tinkle of her laugh had sent Leelee into a panic.

From there, she had spent a lot of time attempting to talk the Maiden down.

“I don’t want to make a big deal about it!”

“Are you familiar with the term ‘overkill’?”

“Come on, didn’t *you* have your share of good times thanks to those ‘pranks’?!”

In one final act of desperation, she’d yelled, “I haven’t even caught a cold!” and then wondered why the hell she was going so far to defend someone she hated.

“Oh dear,” the other girl had replied with a blink. “That’s a good point. Silly me, getting so mad over something that didn’t happen.”

That argument seemed to have touched on one of her core values.

In the end, the pair had settled on returning the hairpin, and as long as the Kins took it back without a fuss, forgetting the whole thing had ever happened—and that brought them to the present moment.

Though to be honest, that ended up being the least of my worries, Leelee thought, staring into the distance.

She couldn't even remember how she had managed to survive the past three days. Despite her mild demeanor, "Shu Keigetsu" had been a strict teacher and used every trick in the book to train Leelee up to her desired level of skill.

All those drills had transformed her into quite the lovely woman, if she did say so herself, but she was still no match for the smiling girl in front of her. It was amazing how she could remain calm with so many eyes on her, both now and when she'd first entered the room.

But forget that... Where's Lady Gayou?

Redirecting her attention, Leelee stole a glance at the court ladies standing behind Kin Seika. Gayou had always kept her face hidden behind her fan, so Leelee didn't know what she looked like. Not only did the high-ranking and low-ranking retainers have few opportunities to interact, but Leelee didn't have friends among the court ladies she could ask for information.

If I hear her talk again, I should be able to tell which one is her.

Leelee had been so focused on *what* the woman had been saying that she wasn't confident she could recognize the sound of her voice, but she'd had a fairly elegant manner of speech.

Almost as though they'd read Leelee's mind, Seika's attendants began speaking in turn.

"My. That's a stunning accessory, but however did you come into possession of it while on suspension?"

"Let me guess: You were disciplined in name only, and you've spent your days flaunting your wealth and abusing your court ladies? Just like always!"

From the looks of it, they'd stepped up to provide covering fire for their speechless mistress.

Their comments made Leelee frown, but she snapped to attention when Shu Keigetsu shot her a glance. *Is it her?* the Maiden asked with her gaze.

It wasn't. The woman hadn't talked that fast. Leelee gave her a look that said *No*.

"Stop it. You insult Noble Consort Shu. Based on what I've heard, Shu Keigetsu has indeed been confined to a barren room."

"But then how did she come upon such a splendid item, Lady Seika?"

Is it her?

No.

Under normal circumstances, a verbal assault like that would have had her shrinking back, but Leelee kept her cool and continued signaling her mistress.

"Could she have stolen it? I recall someone lamenting the loss of her ornamental hairpin."

It's not her either.

I see.

"Now that sounds plausible! There's no telling what a person might do when her back is to the wall. To have but one attendant must have made for quite the wretched existence!"

Not her.

Got it.

Leelee no longer cowered before the ivory silks who launched a barrage of biting ridicule under the guise of private conversation.

"And now that I'm taking a closer look, isn't her court lady that dancer's daughter? You know the one—that Shu Palace girl who's supposed to have decent looks but has all sorts of terrible rumors about her! Just look at that vulgar, lascivious face. I bet she had *her* steal it."

It's not her, Leelee signaled, unfazed by the insult, but she frowned upon seeing that her mistress had gone stock-still.

"Hm? Milady—"

“You there,” she said before Leelee could finish, whirling on one of the Kin clan court ladies.

Leelee jolted when she saw her expression.

She has that look she gets with the aphids!

The whole Gayou matter aside, it seemed she was upset with the woman who had insulted Leelee.

“Did I just hear you disparage my court lady?”

The ivory silk was shocked to hear this abrupt objection from the Shu Maiden, who had behaved so graciously until that point. Though momentarily flustered, she soon lifted her chin in defiance and sidled toward her mistress. “I was only stating my opinion, Lady Seika.”

Her eyes narrowing a fraction, Shu Keigetsu was quick to shut down that line of defense. “Should I assume such opinions are representative of the Kin clan, then?” She then locked her sights on the other Maiden. “Lady Seika, allow me to be frank. Here in the Maiden Court, much like the consorts and their Maidens are as close as a mother and daughter, so must the Maidens and their court ladies forge a strong bond. If your attendant acts out, I believe it your duty as her Maiden to reprimand her.”

The crowd buzzed at her blunt assertion. Shu Keigetsu had never stated an opinion so openly before. And certainly not one so grounded in ethics. Her dignified gaze made *her* look the part of an exemplary Maiden. Everyone stared at her, their breath stolen before they knew what had hit them.

“May I ask that you retract your unwarranted comments about my court lady? If you refuse, then—”

Another voice cut her off. “That’s enough, Keigetsu!”

When she looked over, she found it to be none other than Noble Consort Shu, who was seated toward the back of the room.

Her gentle face was flushed a deep red, and for once she had raised her voice. “You should be ashamed! First you waltz into a ceremony when you’re on suspension, and now you interrupt the proceedings to start a fight with another

clan? How much must you disgrace me before you're satisfied?!"

"But, Consort Shu... My term of suspension is over, and I'm not trying to start a fight. I only want to have a discussion."

"I've heard enough of your excuses! Go back to the palace before you embarrass me further. Do you hear me? Consider this a warning!" she yelled back, loud enough to make one wonder where the usual delicate consort had gone. No doubt she hoped to maintain the Shu clan's appearances by denouncing the Maiden once and for all.

However, the victim of her tirade didn't so much as flinch. She looked straight back at the Noble Consort, then at last said, "I understand."

Leelee was relieved to hear that she was willing to back down, only to go goggle-eyed at what she said next.

"Then so long as I don't interrupt the proceedings and don't embarrass you further, I'm free to continue my discussion with Lady Seika?"

"What?"

"I'll go get my dance over with."

"Excuse me?!"

No sooner had the Maiden declared her intentions than she rose to her feet.

Everyone looked on in surprise as she strode lithely toward the stage. This was Shu Keigetsu, that terrible performer who spent every ceremony hunched in on herself, a look of meek submission in her eyes. How could she hope to follow a master like Kin Seika with a dance that wouldn't embarrass the consort further?

"Promise me this, Lady Seika: If my dance doesn't prove an affront to the audience, and I bring this ceremony to an end without incident, the two of us shall finish our discussion," Shu Keigetsu said as she took the stage.

"Really?" Seika stared back at her. All sorts of thoughts flitted across her large, catlike eyes, but the corners of her mouth eventually lifted into a smirk. "Very well. But only if you can perform a dance good enough to please the goddess of fertility."

“I’ll do my best.”

At the end of that exchange, the two girls traded places.

A Kin court lady handed the *khakkhara* staff to Shu Keigetsu where she knelt in the center of the stage. Brandished in prayer of a good harvest, this custom-made staff was meant to be passed between all four of the Maidens.

But the moment Shu Keigetsu took it in hand, there was an accident.

Shshshshhh!

The ornaments affixed to the head of the staff came loose all at once. The string of bells popped undone one after the other, scattering across the stage in a shrill cacophony. It seemed the high-ranking Kin court lady had cut the strand as payback.

“Lady Kin Seika,” Shin-u said, narrowing his eyes in accusation.

“It wasn’t me, Captain!” she was quick to assert. “I didn’t order this.”

She glared at her attendant, her eyes bearing the chill of a wrought metal blade.

“I am a daughter of the Kins, those who prize aesthetic and know what pride is all about. Whether or not I resort to such cheap tricks, everyone here knows that the goddess is bound to find my dance more pleasing than any of the other Maidens’. There isn’t a single member of the Kin clan who wouldn’t recognize as much.”

In other words, the court lady who had tried to corner her enemy to the point of defiling the stage no longer counted as part of the Kin clan.

It was fine to pelt an abysmal dancer with rocks, but to interfere with the act of the dance itself was sacrilege. This creed was very characteristic of Seika, but perhaps not as easily understood by others, and the court lady had incurred her mistress’s wrath in violating it.

The woman’s face went pale as she realized her blunder. “Um... Lady Seika...”

Just as the whole room had erupted with tension, a soft voice rang out.

“That’s right.”

The smiling acknowledgment had come from none other than Shu Keigetsu herself, the one whose staff had been ruined.

“Lady Seika is an honorable individual who detests foul play. This must have been an unforeseen accident.”

She set the now-useless staff down along the edge of the stage. “However,” she went on as she rose to her feet, “unforeseen means inauspicious. There mustn’t be any unrest amid a ritual dedicated to the goddess. Allow me to dispel this omen by changing up my dance.”

Then, she took the shawl that had been wrapped around her shoulders and draped it loosely over her arms.

“Lady Shu Keigetsu...?”

“What are you—?”

Ignoring the incredulous reactions of Shin-u and Seika, she folded her hands and lowered her gaze, then spoke the words that signaled the start of the performance.

“May the goddess of fertility smile upon us in the coming autumn days.”

The moment after the music of the *sheng* pipes hesitantly started up, the entire audience gasped in unison. Shu Keigetsu was wearing a smile as serene as a celestial maiden.

She lifted both arms as though swept along by the wind. Inclining her whole body like she was savoring a fragrance, she then extended one leg and began a slow circle around the stage. Her sleeves swayed gently, and the shawl fluttered in her hands.

She did nothing more than glide around, both arms outstretched.

Just that was enough to make the spectators see a vision of a celestial maiden gazing down upon the fertile lands with a smile.

“What’s happening?” Seika wondered aloud, dumbfounded.

She understood because she was an expert dancer herself; it took a tremendous amount of practice to refine such a seemingly simple gesture to the point of captivating an audience. For instance, even something as trivial as

the way she bent down or rotated her wrists demonstrated that she had trained her core with precision.

Seika knew of only one woman who embodied such elegance backed by hard work.

She's almost like Kou Reirin...

However, what she saw in the next moment would push that thought from her mind.

Well, sort of. Kou Reirin specialized in dances that were every bit delicate and graceful—or, to put it another way, as physically undemanding as possible. There was no way she would ever perform *this* dance.

I mean, look at the way she's moving... This has to be...

The music of the *sheng* sped up. The melody changed, and the powerful, high-pitched notes of the lute and flute came into the mix.

Shiing!

Shu Keigetsu whipped around with the shawl in her hands. As she waved her arms swiftly through the air, she used that momentum to twirl herself around. Her shawl danced and fluttered, almost like it was playing in the wind.

Or as if she herself had become a butterfly.

The crowd broke into a round of feverish whispers at the sight of her flitting all across the stage at alternating tempos.

“The Sogdian Whirl!”

It was a foreign dance featuring such intense twirls that only a scant few performing courtesans had mastered it.

Shu Keigetsu's dance didn't stop. Despite the furious speed of her turns, the elegant flow of her shawl that followed a beat later captivated the eyes of the crowd. Even the occasional—perhaps intentional—metallic tinkle of her toes brushing the bells on the floor served to excite the audience.

Faster. She had to go even faster. She had to soar to new heights. Be more graceful. More sublime.

Everyone was entranced by Shu Keigetsu as she danced as though chasing the light pouring down into the atrium, a faint smile spread across her face. Some were even moved to tears by the sheer beauty of the sight.

Eventually, the music hit its climax and tapered off into the end of the piece. Its high-pitched trill faded to a whisper, until finally the song came to a close on one long, drawn-out note. Shu Keigetsu likewise brought her dance to an end, holding her arms up to the heavens in supplication.

Her shawl swayed with the lingering momentum and then at last went still.

Even now that the fabric that had danced like the wind had settled to a stop, the crowd found themselves unable to speak.

Dousing her in water was out of the question. On the contrary—the audience was so caught up in the afterglow of the performance that no one even thought to applaud.

“...”

Gyoumei was yet another spectator lost for words.

What’s happening? he thought, clutching his chest in spite of himself. *Why is my heart beating so fast?*



He realized that he was the most attracted to Shu Keigetsu he had ever been. Yet he didn't want to believe it. Kou Reirin was supposed to be the only one to whom he had ever opened his heart. She was the only one whose strength of will he had ever admired, and the only one whom he had granted the nickname of "butterfly" for her captivating dance.

Then how could he be so enthralled by the very woman who had hurt Reirin—the obsequious, treacherous sewer rat of the Maiden Court?

"Your Highness. Your favor?" Shin-u prompted him in a whisper. Even *his* usual doll-like face was tinged with exhilaration, and his voice came out in a husky rumble. "I'd say you owe the finest gift of all to this celestial maiden who has descended upon our Maiden Court."

His guard's reminder snapped him back to his senses.

However, his brow furrowed as he considered what to present her. He had already given Kin Seika a favor as valuable as a national heirloom. The only way to top that was to hand over one of his own personal accessories. In truth, he had never expected Shu Keigetsu to put on such an incredible dance and thus hadn't readied much of a gift for her. A quick glance around the room told that the empress and the four consorts were in the same predicament.

By that point, the court ladies and eunuchs were slowly but surely returning to reality and had broken into a round of applause. At first it was scattered, but as the audience stirred back to life one after the other, the sound began to sweep across the room. Soon enough, the thunderous ovation had grown loud enough to reverberate throughout the whole Maiden Court.

Thank goodness. It looks like I managed to avoid execution, at least.

Reirin was relieved to see everyone clapping their hands with a flush on their cheeks.

Right after throwing down the gauntlet, she'd recalled that Gyoumei had told her, "If you behave like Kou Reirin, I'll have you executed," and scrambled to change her act to something she couldn't have danced during her Reirin era.

It was a good thing I asked Leelee to teach me the Sogdian Whirl. I'd always longed to try it.

The fact that she'd just so happened to achieve a long-held dream of hers in the process had her in the best of moods.

The intense twirls of the Sogdian Whirl were so physically strenuous that it had very few instructors, making it a difficult dance to learn. She'd asked Leelee, whose mother had been a master of the dance, to teach her the moves because the chance had presented itself, but she never imagined that she'd be granted the opportunity to show it off so soon.

It had been worth all the trouble of jogging Leelee's fuzzy memory.

"How can *you* pull off a dance that's a challenge for even a courtesan?!" Seika demanded, still wide-eyed and trembling.

"I had a talented court lady to teach me. Her mother educated her well in the ways of the Sogdian Whirl," Reirin replied with a smile that said, *Aren't you jealous?*

She then noticed out of the corner of her eye that Leelee was looking down at the floor, her shoulders shaking. By the looks of it, she was crying.

Huh? Did I make her cry?!

Reirin was a little distressed, but she hurried to pull herself together. Those probably weren't *bad* tears. In which case, they wouldn't be a detriment to her health but rather a purification of the body and soul. Probably.

Never mind that! I still need to get an apology for that insult to Leelee.

For all her gentle appearances, Reirin was an aggressive girl; she had no intention of leaving the matter up in the air. She had yet to receive her gifts, but seeing as she'd completed her dance, she figured her turn was over for all intents and purposes.

Pushing the dance from her mind, Reirin turned to Seika with a dead serious look on her face. "Now that the dance of offering is over, let's get back to the matter—"

"Hold on. Nobody's presented you with an award yet!" Seika sputtered.

"The applause was all I require." Reirin gave a decisive shake of her head and leaned forward. "Now about what that ivory silk said earlier. What is the

meaning of her treating my court lady like some common thief? On that note —”

“Wait! Slow down. Do you realize how stunning a dance you just showed us?! Allow us the chance to give form to our appreciation!”

Somewhere down the line, it had turned into a bizarre situation where the bully was begging to sing her victim’s praises. For Seika, who valued beauty above all else, it was unacceptable to have such a beautiful dance go unrewarded. Exceptional works of art were to be loved and praised by all.

It was then that Gyoumei broke his silence. “Shu Keigetsu. That dance was more splendid than any I’ve ever seen, one that truly evoked the beauty of a bountiful harvest.”

A hushed stir swept through the crowd at this compliment of the highest order.

Gyoumei rose to his feet. He turned those virile good looks capable of enthralling any woman upon the Shu Maiden. There was conflict in his eyes—and at the same time, a raging heat.

Anyone could see that he, who had never kept anyone but Kou Reirin in his sights, was now hopelessly attracted to Shu Keigetsu.

“Even a gold-plated crystal wouldn’t be enough to honor that performance. I shall prepare another reward for you later. For now, take this.”

What he held out was none other than the fan he’d been carrying on him until that moment. It was inlaid with gems and even boasted a string of jade and pearls. The crowd gasped at the opulence of the gift—and more than that, at the fact that the prince had offered one of his personal effects to another woman.

That was something that had only ever been allowed to Kou Reirin.

“Don’t get me wrong. I offer this as a reward for your dance, not you—”

“I see. I am beside myself with joy to receive Your Highness’s kindness, I give my humble thanks for this offering and shall strive to give my all moving forward, and now that I have accepted my reward, may I please go back to my

earlier conversation?”

The recipient of the gift, meanwhile, rattled off her thanks so fast it could only be described as perfunctory, then steered the conversation back to the original topic.

“Now then, Lady Seika. I’m afraid I cannot abide by your ivory silk’s comment about—”

“H-hold on! Your Highness was gracious enough to...”

Seika’s eyes darted about in bewilderment. This was Gyoumei’s favor—that which any Maiden would dream of receiving. And she was regarding it like it was a consolation prize of a hand towel?

Gyoumei was no less flabbergasted. When Shin-u noticed his half brother’s reaction, he turned his face to hide the laughter creeping over him. Bunkou and the rest of the eunuchs stared in horror as their captain drew his lips into a tight line, his shoulders shaking with mirth.

That whole room had been thrown into chaos.

“For starters, to what extent do you keep tabs on your court ladies? Was there someone who claimed to have had her ornamental hairpin stolen by the Shu clan about three days ago? If there was, please tell me her distinguishing features, background, and least favorite food right this—”

“W-would you back off a little, please?! Forget that! Go accept His Highness’s offering! This is beyond insulting!”

“What I’m concerned with at the moment is the insult from *earlier*. Listen here, Lady Seika: ‘First in first out’ is one of the basics of safe food storage. We must first clear up the matter at hand before we move on to something else.”

“What does food storage have to do with it? Oh, for mercy’s sake—*fine!* All right, already! I apologize for what my court lady said earlier!” Seika all but screamed, the first of the pair to fold. Artist or no, she had too much common sense to leave the paralyzed prince hanging. “Your attendant is a wonderful woman of looks and talent! There! Happy now?”

“While you’re at it, could I ask you to call an ivory silk by the name of Gayou

here?”

“Who? Gayou?” Seika responded, drawing back from the girl who had taken her concession and kept pushing and pushing. However, her face was filled with genuine confusion. “We don’t have an ivory silk named Gayou.”

“Huh...?”

Shu Keigetsu stopped right where she was leaning into Seika’s personal space.

What’s going on here? Reirin wondered, perplexed. There was no way Leelee had lied to her. Had the woman used a fake name, perhaps?

“Then...was there a court lady who claimed to have her ornamental hairpin stolen about three days ago?”

“Three days ago? There *was* someone who made a fuss about how someone might have stolen her missing hairpin, but that was almost a month ago now.”

“What?”

Something was wrong here.

However, a woman’s voice disrupted their conversation before she could start asking questions. “Look! There’s a Kou court lady coming this way! Whatever could be the matter?”

It was Noble Consort Shu who had spoken up. Upon casting her gaze elsewhere in discomfort, she had caught sight of someone running toward the room.

“I’m terribly sorry to disturb such a solemn ceremony! I have an urgent message for Her Majesty the Empress!”

The head court lady of the Kou clan—Tousetsu—soon reached the room and knelt down at the entrance. Her shoulders were heaving with the effort of her breathing, and her forehead was beaded with sweat.

“Your Majesty, please return to the Palace of the Golden Qilin at once! Our Maiden...Lady Reirin is in great anguish!”

“What?” Gyomei shouted, brushing his mother aside to respond to the ominous piece of news himself.

An uncharacteristic amount of panic showing on her face, Tousetsu responded in a trembling voice, “Her fever... It refuses to go down. Her skin is burning up like never before. She’s entered a hallucination-plagued stupor, and moments ago she even started having seizures. We called for the apothecary, but no medicine seems to work. As sickly as Lady Reirin is, I’ve never seen anything like *this*. At this rate... At this rate...!”

Tousetsu choked on her words. The crowd stirred at the foreboding implications of her half-finished sentence.

“Silence,” came a woman’s authoritative voice.

Who should draw a gasp from the crowd and take instant command of the mood but Empress Kou Kenshuu herself.

Kenshuu rose from her seat, arranging the hefty hem of her garment. “I understand the situation. But, Tousetsu? To wear your distress on your sleeve is unbecoming of the leader of the gamboge golds,” she admonished the court lady in a dignified voice, somewhat low for a woman’s. “Despite appearances, Reirin is a strong-willed girl. No doubt she’s giving her all to brave what ails her. What use are her efforts if those around her fall apart?”

“But, Your Majesty... This seems different from usual!” Tousetsu argued back, fear in her eyes. “I’m afraid Lady Reirin might not make it through the—”

“For argument’s sake,” Kenshuu cut her off, “if that beloved niece of mine should fail to make it through the night, then I shall take that to be the Mandate of Heaven.”

“Your Majesty!”

“However, if she desires to fight her fate and live to see tomorrow, we should spare no effort to aid her in that endeavor. Do you understand me, Tousetsu? Keep it together and do all that you can.”

Kenshuu turned on her heel and hurried to exit the room. She appeared intent on deserting the ceremony to head back to the Palace of the Golden Qilin. Gyomei was quick to follow suit.

“Kin Seika,” he called out, “this has been a magnificent rite. Please excuse our premature departure.”

“I’m honored to hear it,” came the Maiden’s stunned response as she struggled to process this sudden turn of events.

However, someone else called Kenshuu to a stop right as she was about to leave. “Please wait, Your Majesty! Your Highness!”

It was none other than Shu Keigetsu.

She knelt swiftly atop the stage, then shot a piercing gaze straight through both Kenshuu and Gyoumei. “I beseech you, allow me to accompany you to the Palace of the Golden Qilin.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know the ins and outs of tending to the sick. I’m positive I’ll be able to cure her illness.”

“Ridiculous.” Kenshuu readily dismissed her earnest plea. Her imposing face twisted in displeasure. “Do you think yourself more knowledgeable than an apothecary? Please. The only one I know who would be qualified to make such an arrogant claim is Reirin herself.”

“And I’m saying—!”

“Know your place, Shu Keigetsu,” Gyoumei silenced the Maiden as she thrust herself toward the pair with a look of grim determination. “Hear this: The Lion’s Judgment may have absolved you of your crimes, but everyone here knows that you meant to kill Reirin. You think I’d allow you anywhere near her sickbed?!”

His once-firm, regal voice had lost any semblance of control. That proved how distraught he was. No man could stay calm when he was about to lose his beloved. In contrast to his mother, who stood as firm as the earth, the Gen blood he’d inherited from his father was raging hard enough to sweep away the dam of his heart.

He deeply regretted the events of the past few minutes. Reirin was the only one he had ever allowed into his heart. No matter the cost, he had vowed to love her and her alone—the lovely butterfly bestowed upon him by the very heavens.

Yet not only did I doubt her, but I allowed myself to be captivated by another

woman, if only for a moment. That's what led to this.

That was the reason the heavens now plotted to take Reirin from him.

The subconscious guilt he felt over falling for Shu Keigetsu's dance had turned into a fierce regret and spite that threatened to consume him whole. "Do you hear me? Don't you *ever* set foot near Kou Palace. We'll protect Reirin, be it from disease or physical threat."

"You're wrong, Your Highness! I mean her no harm. I beg of you, please believe me! I'll swear it upon whatever I must. Just take me at my word!"

The same Shu Keigetsu who hadn't even begged for her life before the Lion's Judgment was now going red in the face with the effort of her pleas.

Gyoumei frowned. "Why are you so desperate to save Reirin's life? You've never done anything but envy her, shooting her baleful looks day in and day out."

"Huh?! I have?!"

"What?" His brow furrowed further at her inexplicable response.

"I mean, no!" She scrambled to correct herself, shaking her head. "Y-you're right. I never *could* keep my eyes off her. I remember now. But that wasn't out of malice! The truth is that I, er...I-liked her? Yeah!"

"Why are you getting embarrassed about it?" He was struggling to pin down Shu Keigetsu's character. Despite his lingering confusion, Gyoumei determined he didn't have time for this and turned to go.

It was at that point that the girl rose to her feet and rushed after him. "Please! Treat this as my reward for the dance I just performed. I want the right to tend to her more than any crystals or goldwork!"

"Enough!" Gyoumei roared, smacking her hand away as she made a grab for his robe. "I told you I can't trust you!"

The air vibrated with the force of his voice. His dragon's qi oozed from his strong features, sending much of the crowd instinctively scrambling back on their knees.

Yet Shu Keigetsu didn't back down. Her back straight as a rod, she turned to

face Gyomei. “I beg of you. It is precisely because I drove her into that predicament that I must be the one to save her.”

“Very well.”

The one to break their stalemate was Kenshuu.

Her son whipped around in surprise, to which she responded with the raise of an eyebrow. It looked more like the exchange between two military officers than a mother and her son.

“Shu Keigetsu. If you’re that determined, I shall grant you your chance.”

“Your Majesty! Thank yo—”

“However, it’s true that no one from the Kou Palace would trust you after the way you insulted my beloved Reirin. Therefore, it’s not a chance to treat her that I offer you but a chance to earn our trust.”

“Huh...?”

Kenshuu lifted the corner of her mouth into a smirk when she saw the confusion swimming in the Maiden’s eyes. She then called upon Shin-u.

“Captain. Bring me the Bow of Warding.”

“What?” Shin-u gave a dubious frown.

He nevertheless followed his orders, presenting to her the sacred bow adorned in a five-colored thread. Kenshuu took it and thrust it upon Shu Keigetsu.

“You are to draw this bow. For one full night.”

“Huh?”

“The Bow of Warding is said to frighten off disease with the sound of its vibrations—and to exorcise it with the sound of an arrow hitting its target. If you can draw this bow all night long while praying for Reirin’s recovery, I will acknowledge that you mean her no harm and allow you to attend her sickbed.”

It was the very Kou-like strategy of determining someone’s true nature through their backbone.

“Hold on, Your Majesty.” Surprisingly, Shin-u cut in to object. “The Bow of

Warding is so heavy that even most men would struggle to draw it. Furthermore, as a sacred treasure that has long been in the custody of His Majesty the Emperor—that is, the Gen clan—it possesses a strong aura of water. A Maiden of the clan under the patronage of flame isn't suited to wield it."

Kenshoo brushed aside his concerns. "All the more reason for it. A trial to measure her sincerity could hardly be an easy one, now could it?"

"But, ah... If she is to spend all night drawing it, her original offer to help might come to nothing."

"Didn't you hear me earlier? If that's what it comes to, then that was the Mandate of Heaven. Any further rebuttals will be considered overstepping your bounds, Captain." The empress shut down the guard's argument, then shot Shu Keigetsu a sharp glare. "You disparaged my adorable Reirin in a fit of misplaced jealousy. Don't think *I've* forgiven you either. If this is nothing more than a ploy to flaunt your superficial virtue, you'd do better to prostrate yourself on the ground and start apologizing instead."

When it came down to it, she was yet another soul who burned with hatred for Shu Keigetsu.

Kenshoo then turned to leave once and for all and exited the room. Gyoumei followed close behind. Only the stupefied crowd was left behind in the atrium.

A glance in Shu Keigetsu's direction showed her hanging her head in silence, the tightly drawn bow still clutched in her hands. Figuring words had failed her after that dressing-down, Leelee cast a sympathetic look in her direction.

Shin-u walked up to her. "Shu Keigetsu. That was a roundabout way of telling you to keep your head down. There's little to be gained from falling over yourself for Kou Reirin at this—"

"Hee hee..."

All of sudden, she let out a soft laugh.

The captain's eyes went wide. "Shu Keigetsu?"

"She wants me to draw a bow. For a whole night straight. Hee hee... That *does*

sound like quite the rewarding challenge. I'd expect nothing less from Her Majesty," she murmured, then spun around to address the attendant by her side. "It's hard not to feel impatient, but the empress is right: She's still clinging to life. There's no use fretting over something that has yet to happen. I know I can count on her to stick this out."

Nobody had a clue what she was going on about. However, Shin-u knew one thing for sure: Much like during the Lion's Judgment, she was approaching that realm of enlightenment that gave her an almost intimidating air.

"Let's do this! It's time for some all-night archery!"

Her eyes dancing with stars, the girl with Shu Keigetsu's face balled her hands into determined fists.

Chapter 9:

Reirin Draws a Bow

“I’VE BROUGHT YOU some water, milady.”

The sun had long since set, leaving the sky blanketed in darkness. Leelee offered some water to her mistress, who had been firing arrows nonstop in a corner of the training grounds borrowed from the Eagle Eyes.

However, the bow-wielding girl didn’t afford the bowl so much as a sideways glance. When Leelee noticed that the food and water she’d brought earlier were still sitting untouched on the ground beside her, she raised her voice in a yell. “What are you doing?! You told me you were actually going to eat something last time!”

“...”

The girl didn’t respond. She only drew her bow in silence.

So powerful was said bow that the *twang* of its string was loud enough to send vibrations through the eardrums. The following moment, the arrow soared straight through the air, only to gradually veer off course and sail under the target.

“Mm. Missed again,” she mumbled in frustration, before whipping around like she had only just noticed her attendant there. “Sorry, Leelee. Um, what were you asking? Whether I prefer honey or salt on my fried potatoes?”

“You need to get *on target* with this damn conversation!” she shouted, accidentally slipping back into her natural street talk. Abashed, she went on to explain, “I was advising you to have a proper meal. You haven’t had anything to eat since breakfast, have you? It’s even worse when you’ve been drawing that monster of a bow nonstop. No matter *how* tough you are...that could be enough to lay anyone flat.”

The Maiden smiled. “My. Are you worried about me? I appreciate it.”

“I am not! If you pass out, I’ll lose my place to sleep. That’s all!” Leelee

babbled back at her, then sheepishly added, “So...how about calling it a night?” Her eyes traveled down to the hand that had been drawing the bow—that slender hand quivering with the effort of the task.

The sacred weapon said to ward off evil had a build every bit as imposing as its reputation would suggest, enough that even a girl as tall as Shu Keigetsu struggled to hold it up. When Leelee had taken a go at it not too long ago, she had been shocked at how heavy it was. Worse still, the bow’s strong water qi made it so resistant to the touch of a Shu that no matter how hard she’d pulled the string, she hadn’t felt the slightest bit of give.

The Maiden had been drawing that bow for over six hours now. And this was on top of performing the Sogdian Whirl for the ceremony, rushing back to the storehouse, and delivering the herbs she’d brewed for Kou Reirin to the Palace of the Golden Qilin.

“Once you’re convinced of my good intentions, please have her take this medicine,” she’d told the court ladies of the Kou Palace.

At first, the women had given her a frosty reception. However, as they’d taken turns coming by the range to keep an eye on her, the sight of Shu Keigetsu sweating buckets as she drew her bow had left them wide-eyed with shock, then stunned them into silence, and ultimately sent them wandering off like they’d lost a battle of wills. Or perhaps it was that they’d grown tired of watching or even succumbed to a wave of drowsiness.

Leelee’s mistress had been firing her bow incessantly enough to make her audience grow bored of spectating her.

Her arms had long been trembling, and her shoulders were starting to swell. Her fingers had probably gone numb too. After all, she had no archery clothes to wear, so she had cut off part of the long sleeves of her ceremonial robe and wrapped that around her hand in lieu of the traditional finger guard.

By this point, Leelee couldn’t help but be concerned for her.

“If nothing else, I’m sure those Kou court ladies could see how serious you are about helping Lady Kou Reirin. I don’t know if that will be enough to make up for what you’ve done, but I’m sure it’ll serve as the start of an apology. Isn’t that enough for now?”

At the rate she was going, her mistress really *was* going to collapse.

“She’s right,” came a deep voice.

When Leelee turned around to see who it was, there stood Shin-u, the ever-sullen captain of the Eagle Eyes, and his subordinate, Bunkou, who was holding a torch.

“Captain! What are you doing here? Don’t tell me... I-I mean, are you here to arrest me, sir?” Leelee asked, memories of the time he’d restrained her keeping her on edge.

“Of course not. I’m here to talk down your reckless Maiden,” he responded with a snort. Then he looked at the girl still aiming her bow. “I’ve received complaints from the court ladies and eunuchs who couldn’t bear to watch this any longer. They said that you’ve drawn that bow more than enough to make amends.”

“Well, ‘received complaints’ is one way of putting it. It’s more like *he* came by the range to spy on you a few times, then forced the others to say some—ouch!”

Shin-u silenced Bunkou’s whispered clarification with a swift stomp to the foot.

“The Kous want to focus their efforts on tending to Lady Reirin and can no longer spare the personnel to supervise you; thus, so too has the Palace of the Golden Qilin gone on record that there’s no need to continue drawing that bow. You’re free to stop any time now, Shu Keigetsu,” the captain assured her in a surprisingly gentle tone.

“Did she take the medicine I made, then?” Reirin asked, turning only her head to look at him.

He paused. “Based on what I’ve heard, Lady Reirin has yet to awaken. She’s been in no condition to take any medicine at all, including that from the apothecary.”

“I see. I’ll have to keep on drawing my bow, then. Besides, I was ordered to do this for one full night.”

“Enough already. I *said* that everyone trusts your good intentions,” Shin-u snapped in irritation, but the girl stood her ground.

“It’s true that I’m drawing this bow to make my intentions known, but the whole reason I must do *that* is to help her. If I can’t save her, there was no point to any of this.”

The finality of her tone struck Shin-u and Bunkou into silence. That meant this wasn’t all an act for the sake of redeeming herself; she really *was* drawing the bow to cure Kou Reirin of her illness.

But had Shu Keigetsu always been such a self-sacrificing person?

Leelee shot the guards a look that said, *See, isn’t she a handful?* Shin-u opened his mouth to go a second round arguing on behalf of the group, but then all of a sudden, he drew his brow into a frown.

“Hey. Let me have a look at your right hand.”

“Huh?” For whatever reason, the Maiden stopped what she was doing in a panic. “No, erm...it wouldn’t be appropriate to let a man other than His Highness touch—”

She attempted to hide the hand that was clutching her next arrow behind her back. When Shin-u nevertheless reached out to seize it by force, she made the face of someone holding back a scream.

“You’re kidding me...”

As soon as Shin-u had unwrapped the fabric tied around her hand, the whole group was knocked speechless. Leelee, for her part, went white as a sheet as she stared down at the gruesome sight unveiled in the torchlight.

“What... What were you thinking?!” the redhead cried. “Your hand is torn to shreds!”

The girl’s hand had once been as immaculate as any noblewoman’s. Now it had been reduced to a bloody mess of flayed skin.

“I-It’s okay. I’ve been careful not to get any blood on the sacred—”

“That’s not the issue!”

“Y-you’re right! Obsessing over trivial matters like that does nothing but hamper my focus! Good poi—”

“Not that either! Dumbass!”

“Yes, ma’am! I’m a dumbass!”

All her efforts to watch her language having fallen to the wayside, Leelee stalked forward with a never-before-seen intensity. Her mistress drew a step back, looking uncharacteristically flustered.

Meanwhile, Shin-u scowled and said, “What woman pushes herself to these lengths? I’m taking that bow back.”

When he made a grab for the weapon, the Maiden turned aside to keep it out of his reach. “No!”

“Shu Keigetsu!”

“Why are you trying to stop me, Captain? Aren’t I supposed to be an evil villainess? You shouldn’t fuss over a woman like that taking a few scrapes!” she asserted with such surprising conviction that Shin-u was left no choice but to shut his mouth.

It was in that moment that a eunuch came running from the direction of the Palace of the Golden Qilin. He shouted, “Captain! Lord Bunkou! Word has it that Lady Kou Reirin’s fever has gone down! The apothecary claims that she should be regaining consciousness any minute now!”

“What did you say?” Shin-u said, looking over his shoulder. “We must inform His Highness right away.”

Though Gyoumei’s status allowed him to come and go from the Maiden Court at will, he was still the kingdom’s crown prince. He had been driven back to the main palace under the logic that spending too much time around a sick woman might risk exposing him to a contagion.

Knowing that his half brother would be desperate for whatever news he could get, Shin-u turned swiftly on his heel.

Before he left the archery range, however, he cast one last glance over his shoulder. “I’ll arrange for the apothecary to stop by later. Be sure to get

yourself patched up. Oh, and also? You better have set down that bow by the time I get back. You can put on a brave face all you like, but the sheer amount that you're sweating tells me you're nearing your limit."

"My. That's very sweet of you to say, Captain. Are you worried about me?"

"If I say yes, will you listen to me?" he grunted under his breath.

The girl's eyes widened ever so slightly, but she soon smiled and gave a silent shake of her head.

"Nobody likes a cheeky girl."

"That makes no difference to me. I regret to say that I'm already despised by nearly anyone and everyone there is."

The pair stared each other down for a good long while. Shin-u gulped upon noticing that those black eyes of hers held a radiance strong enough to shine amid the dark of night.

He was the first of the two to back down. "Try not to overdo it. You there—her court lady. If anything happens to her, send word to the Eagle Eyes' office at once."

With that one last word of advice, the surly-faced captain of the Eagle Eyes turned to leave once and for all. The cheeky villainess known as Shu Keigetsu—or rather, Reirin—watched him go with a smile.

The captain is a very kind man. But still...

Once she'd listened to his footsteps recede into the distance, she wrapped the cloth back around her hand.

"Hold it! At least wait until you've been treated! Lady Kou Reirin is already on the mend. Haven't you done enough?" Leelee all but screamed, but Reirin ignored the girl's cries as she lifted her bow. It was precisely *because* Keigetsu was on the road to recovery that she had to be certain the girl took her medicine. And what's more...

"I'm having a surprising...no, an *incredible* amount of fun with the situation."

Leelee was struck speechless, while her Maiden only smiled.

That's right. I feel bad for Lady Keigetsu, but the truth is...I find this to be quite the heart-pounding predicament, Reirin thought, nodding to herself on the inside.

Leave it to family to know what buttons to push. Kenshuu's assignment had done quite the job stirring the blood of the labor-loving Kou clan sleeping within her.

She was to draw her bow. Over and over again. No matter how her skin tore or her bones creaked.

It was much like swinging a hoe into the rugged terrain again and again. Reirin knew deep down that Kenshuu had proposed this method not out of malice but as the logical conclusion of how to measure the depths of her sincerity. If she were in Kenshuu's position, she would have ordered the same thing.

Plus, the strong water aura poses no problem for me.

The Kou clan was the dynasty of earth who had long plowed the lands. Earth obstructs water. At first the sacred treasure known as the Bow of Warding had held taut as if to reject the hand of "Shu Keigetsu," but as Reirin had persisted in her efforts to draw it, the string had gradually begun to loosen. It felt similar to the phenomenon of coaxing a living creature. Then again, a simpler explanation might have been that she'd worn down the string with the number of times she had pulled on it.

I've lost feeling in my hand, but my accuracy is steadily improving. It feels like the bow is opening up to me bit by bit. I wonder...is it strange of me to be happy about that?

Reirin looked out over the pitch-dark archery range, lit only by an outdoor torch.

Back at the start, all her arrows had fallen short of the target, but now she was starting to hit the straw around the circle. One of her latest attempts had even grazed the edge of the target. All she felt was a budding sense of accomplishment—not so much as a hint of fatigue or resignation.

Yes, she was enjoying herself. Unlike in her Reirin days, when she had been shadowed by anxious attendants and kept on a short leash from dawn to dusk,

she was free to power through challenges to her heart's content, never running the risk of bothering anyone else.

As Reirin stared into the flame flickering beside the target, she thought of Keigetsu.

I'm sorry, Lady Keigetsu. The truth is, I was trying to act tough in front of you, she apologized in her mind. When she and Keigetsu had conversed through the flame three days earlier, she had told just a bit of a lie.

The first thing I wished for on the night of the Double Sevens Festival wasn't better health, exactly.

It had been an easier life.

I must have been tired.

No matter how much medicine she took, there had been no stopping the incessant waves of fever and nausea that assailed her. Her skin would break out the moment she forgot to keep up with her regimen, and the slightest bit of carelessness would have her fainting. She couldn't eat her favorite foods, and she had spent her days forever mindful not to worry other people. She couldn't count the number of times she had gone to bed at night wondering if she would live to see the next morning.

Fear and pain can both become second nature if one feels them often enough. Or perhaps not quite—the truth of the matter was that her heart had grown weary long ago.

That was what had driven Reirin to let go of her negative emotions. Fear, pain, hatred, anger, and obsession. All those did was drain her of her strength. No doubt the reason she had devoted herself to her training in times of sickness was to empty her mind of thoughts.

But then...

As she rubbed at her arm, which had at last grown too sore to ignore, a smile rose to Reirin's sweat-slicked face.

But then, on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, a comet had granted her a robust new body. Each and every day she spent in Keigetsu's form, she was

deeply moved to learn what it meant to be in fit condition.

She could laugh out loud and throw herself into any activity for no other reason than she wanted to. She could feel pain, fuss over other people, and get mad. Every day felt so very vivid and real that sometimes it was all Reirin could do not to burst into tears.

Lady Keigetsu... I'm truly grateful to you. And I'm sorry.

Keigetsu had once lashed out at her for acting "above it all." Though Reirin had never thought herself better than anyone else, it was true that she had been indifferent to those around her.

Say, Lady Keigetsu? I have boundless stamina now. Enough wondrous strength to let my heart run free. And so...

Reirin raised her screaming arms and readied her bow. She nocked the arrow and drew it to her cheek.



Allow me to struggle disgracefully, push myself past my limits—and save your life!

She wasn't about to let Keigetsu succumb to her own body.

Twaaang!

The arrow she'd loosed drew an arc through the air as fast as a star streaking through the sky, until it struck home at last.

"Oh!" Leelee gasped at what she saw.

The arrow had hit the bullseye.

"Ah! I did it! I did it, Leelee!" Reirin exclaimed in delight, her eyes sparkling with joy. "Did you see that? Did you?! The bow is definitely opening up to me! I'm not about to stop now. I can keep going! I can keep on drawing this bow for as many arrows and as many hours as it takes!"

In her excitement, she reached out to start nocking her next arrow.

Just then, a round of cheers drifted toward the girls on the night breeze, coming from the direction of the distant Kou Palace. Reirin and Leelee were quick to exchange glances. That was a good sign that "Kou Reirin" had regained consciousness.

The Maiden closed her eyes for a moment. Picking up on the glee that permeated the silence, she murmured, "Thank goodness..."

The arms fallen slack by her side were quivering as though they had just remembered what pain she was in. Once she'd given each limb a gentle caress, Reirin clasped them both to her chest and hugged the bow close.

"Oh! I'm so glad!"

A heat welled up in her chest and her throat. Reirin hurried to blink away the emotion so strong that it shot through her whole body until it threatened to materialize as teardrops. Though her eyes had always been quick to mist over, it was her policy not to cry in front of other people.

Instead, she smiled and turned to her attendant. "Leelee. Sorry to ask this, but would you mind going to the Eagle Eyes' office and confirming that you-

know-who is up?”

“Uh, sure...” Leelee began to respond, but for whatever reason, she trailed off all of a sudden. Frowning, she peered into her mistress’s face like she was performing an inspection. “I don’t mind, of course...but, uh...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Well... Is it just me, or is your face as white as a sheet?”

“Huh?”

As she cocked her head to one side, Reirin noticed that Leelee had started wobbling on her feet.

Oh?

No. That wasn’t right. *She* was the one wobbling.

“Oh...?”

The moment she realized as much, she felt her whole world start to spin. She was hit with a ringing in her ears, a sense of claustrophobia, and a slight wave of nausea. It was something she hadn’t experienced in quite a long time: a fainting spell.

Uh-oh... It’s because...I relaxed all of a sudden...

Despite her blind faith that there was nothing her new body couldn’t handle, now that she stopped to think about it, not only had she gotten so caught up in her embroidery work that she’d hardly slept for the past few days, but she’d been up since morning dancing the Sogdian Whirl, brewing herbs, and drawing a bow until late in the night.

Huh...? O-oh no... My eight-day record of not losing consciousness... Ruined...

By the time she realized she was going to faint, her knees were already crumpling under her.

“Ah...”

“Hey!”

Just as she heard Leelee’s shout, an excruciating pain shot through her entire body. Amid the desperate cries of her attendant and the faraway touch of an

arm cradling her shoulder, Reirin passed out for the first time in eight days.

Blast it...

From his main palace chambers far from the Maiden Court, Gyomei glared up at the moon.

He strained his ears in hopes that he might hear some of what was going on in the court, but despairing when nothing reached him but the silence of the night, he let out a small sigh. He couldn't count how many times he'd done that now.

"It appears you're having trouble sleeping, Your Highness. Shall I bring you a drink?" a eunuch ventured from his post outside the door.

"No need. Has there been any word from the Palace of the Golden Qilin?" the prince asked with an air of impatience.

"I'm afraid not. It would seem they're so focused on tending to Lady Kou Reirin that they've neglected their reports to us," the eunuch replied, prostrating himself. He was the official who served as the messenger between the main palace and the Maiden Court.

"That's fine. It's no fault of yours."

The prince endeavored to keep his voice even. Unsure of where to direct his raging emotions, he tousled his hair in its loose nighttime style. Even in circumstances like this, his page had made sure his locks were well groomed. He was all clean from his bath, and the finest incense was burning amid the first-rate furnishings of his room.

He cast a disgusted glance at everything so "perfectly" arranged around him. He would take the chance to hold Reirin's hand and be there for her over anything he saw there.

The crown prince is nothing more than a pet to be kept. His shapely lips curved into an ironic smile.

He and the empress had gone to the Kou Palace to see how Reirin was doing, but that hadn't lasted long. The moment it had become clear that the Maiden

was in critical condition, Gyoumei had been ushered back to the main palace posthaste. Nothing was allowed to happen to the “Supreme One.”

It was always like that in the inner court of Ei.

Although it seemed like the male heirs to the kingdom were granted unparalleled authority, the reality of the matter was that they were kept reverentially locked in a cage, carefully removed from any strife or misfortune. Whether their mother was killed or their young sister suffered an illness—no, all the more if the crisis hit closer to home—the men would be thrown out of the inner court the moment disaster struck. It was always the women who fought, got hurt, and cried out in pain.

If only he had been ruthless enough to take sacrifices in stride or dense enough to remain oblivious to the suffering of others, Gyoumei might have had an easier time of it. It was a shame that his Kou blood, which desired both to love more than be loved and to protect his precious people at all costs, always wreaked havoc upon his heart in moments like these.

As he recalled the sight of Reirin lying listlessly atop her bed, Gyoumei clenched his hands into fists.

“Shameful.”

“What?” the eunuch asked, leaning forward in a fluster. The prince’s mutterings had been too faint for him to catch.

“Nothing,” he replied with a shake of his head, then made a show of sitting down upon his bed.

Then he grumbled in his inner thoughts once more. *It’s shameful. There’s nothing I can do when the woman I love is in danger.*

He had the virile good looks he had inherited from the chosen woman. He had an excellent physique, the talent to do anything he set his mind to, a dragon’s qi formed from the blood of all five clans, and the status of the Supreme One. But what good did any of that do him?

Though he could arrange for the best apothecaries in the kingdom and ensure that she had the most comfortable sickbed environment imaginable, he couldn’t be there for his love when she was suffering the most.

“Excuse me,” the messenger eunuch timidly spoke up, unable to ignore the irritation he saw in Gyoumei’s frown. “I don’t have any news from the Palace of the Golden Qilin...but I *have* heard a report from the Eagle Eyes’ office that Lady Shu Keigetsu continues to draw the Bow of Warding.”

He seemed hesitant to mention “Shu Keigetsu,” the name that could very well be considered Gyoumei’s hot button.

The prince responded with nothing but a silent stare. Determining that he had yet to incur the monarch’s wrath, the eunuch went on in a reserved tone. This was one of the few pieces of good news he could provide.

“There have been two Kou court ladies and two Eagle Eyes stationed to keep watch over her...and according to their report, the Maiden has been drawing her bow for over six hours straight now.”

“Did you say *six hours*?”

The unrealistic number made Gyoumei’s eyes go wide.

Though she had been the one to give the order, surely not even the empress herself had expected her to keep up the exercise for that long.

“That’s right. And before she got started, she went back to the Palace of the Vermillion Stallion—or rather, that dilapidated shed on the grounds—and brewed a decoction for Lady Kou Reirin. Despite the cold glares the gamboge golds gave her when she handed them the medicine, the Maiden was said to merely bow her head and politely take her leave.”

“...”

“After she asked to borrow the Eagle Eyes’ archery range, the first thing she did was cut off the sleeves of her own ceremonial robe. She used one of them to wipe the range clean. The other she used in place of a finger guard. She doesn’t even have a proper archery uniform. She wound the cloth around her hand and has been drawing her bow ever since, refusing to so much as stop to eat. I hear the palm of her hand is already soaked in blood.”

Gyoumei was struck speechless by this scenario that defied all imagination. Meanwhile, there was an unmistakable look of sympathy on the eunuch’s face.

“At first, she couldn’t manage to reach the straw, much less the target, but it’s been said that her accuracy has been steadily improving. Even several of the Eagle Eyes seem impressed. Earlier, the Kou clan had been giving nonstop reports of their Maiden’s condition worsening by the minute, but the news has stopped coming within the past hour or so. I don’t believe that’s a bad sign.”

Though hesitant to inject his personal opinions, the man carefully added, “Maybe, just maybe...it means that Lady Kou Reirin’s ailment is slowly subsiding with each vibration of the bowstring.”

“...”

Maintaining his silence, Gyoumei narrowed his gaze. He couldn’t imagine Shu Keigetsu to be so altruistic a person. She’d told lie after lie, and too many times she had scrambled to put on a sweet and innocent act as soon as she was faced with an authority figure. But still...

If nothing else, it’s true that she’s been drawing that bow all night long.

It wasn’t a question of whether or not he believed it; that much was pure fact. And that meant that *she* was doing more to help Kou Reirin than Gyoumei was, at the very least.

He cast a glance out the window. Far across the night sky, he could have sworn he heard the accumulating echoes of her hand clumsily plucking the bowstring.

It was then that there came a discreet but urgent knock on the door. “Your Highness, I come bearing good news.”

The man with the slightest hint of excitement in his voice was none other than Shin-u, the captain of the Eagle Eyes. It seemed he had forgone a messenger and come to deliver his report himself.

“I’ve been told that Lady Kou Reirin’s fever has gone down. According to the apothecary’s prognosis, she should be coming to shortly.”

“Really?!” Gyoumei felt as though an invisible hand had suddenly loosened its grip on his heart. “I see... That’s wonderful.”

The prince rose from his bed, then flicked his gaze over his own body. He was

fresh out of the bath and fully cleansed. His pure white garment had not a speck of dirt on it.

Upon turning some thoughts over in his head, he called out to the page waiting outside his room. "I'm going out. Bring me a torch."

"Your Highness? While I understand your eagerness, I suggest you leave your visit to the Palace of the Golden Qilin until morning." Shin-u made a discreet effort to rein him in.

"I know. I'm going to the Violet Dragon's Spring," declared Gyoumei.

The calm and collected captain regarded this unexpected destination with a rare surprised blink. "The Violet Dragon's Spring? You mean the one on the forbidden grounds?"

"Yes. As luck would have it, I've already purified myself."

The Violet Dragon's Spring was a small spring hidden in the innermost depths of the imperial palace, tucked away behind a series of forests and waterfalls. Legend had it that the water from this spring that a sage had bequeathed unto the kingdom was as clear as a mirror and reflected the truth, and that using it to cleanse the skin could heal wounds in an instant. For that same reason, the spring was kept under tight control, and not even the crown prince was allowed to draw its water on a whim. Yet here Gyoumei had declared that he was going to fetch that very water before dawn broke.

"But, Your Highness... While the water of the Violet Dragon's Spring may be effective on wounds, I believe it has little power to cure illness," the eunuch inserted with trepidation.

A quiet smile lifted the corner of Gyoumei's mouth. "It ought to be more help than regular water, at the very least. When even the notorious Shu Keigetsu might have contributed to Reirin's recovery, how could I sit back in my bedroom waiting for dawn to break?"

Now that the prince had used his report against him, there was no further argument the eunuch could make. Seeing the look on the man's face, Gyoumei felt something bubbling up within him. It was the power to shine a light on the path ahead and move forward. A little something called hope.

And the ones who had brought him that hope were Reirin, who had clung to the world of the living—and Shu Keigetsu, who had persisted in drawing her bow, honest to a fault.

I'm not about to lose to you.

Taking a decisive step from his room, Gyoumei fired off order after order to the servants scurrying behind him. “Send notice of the excursion. Get me an inkstone and brush to request His Majesty’s permission too. I need a torch wrapped in oil and a pristine cloth, wine to offer at the spring, and a brand-new tub.”

Then he thought for a bit about Shu Keigetsu, who was said to have drawn her bow until her hands were caked in blood.

“Make that two tubs,” Gyoumei declared as he strode confidently into the moonlight.

“Mm...”

As she felt the moonlight streaming in through the window hit her eyelids, Reirin slowly stirred into consciousness.

Where am I?

Experience is everything. Given how used she was to fainting, it was her first instinct to examine her surroundings and physical condition and from that make a deft assessment of her current situation.

Oh... That's right. I collapsed at the archery range. It's...still night, it looks like.

Judging by the moon’s position in the sky, not too much time had passed since she had fainted, and she seemed to be lying on her handwoven grass bed in the Shu Palace storehouse. It was likely Leelee who had carried her there. Or perhaps she had run to the Eagle Eyes’ office and asked them for help. Whatever the case, Reirin’s face fell at the thought that she’d made trouble for her attendant.

Where was Leelee? Had she left to fetch water, or had she gone to the Eagle Eyes to bargain for medicine?

Reirin gave a faint, rueful smile when she looked at her right hand and saw the cloth not-so-skillfully tied around it.

She even patched me up.

The moment she recalled her wounds, they started to ache something fierce.

Lifting her arm, Reirin gingerly unwound the cloth. One look at the gashes unveiled made her sigh and go, “Oh dear.” Nearly all the skin on her palm had peeled back, and blood still oozed from the reddened flesh.

What a terrible thing I’ve done to Lady Keigetsu’s body.

Her head still felt a little fuzzy.

Lying on her back, Reirin rewrapped the cloth with a practiced hand. She would have preferred to cleanse the wound with spring water and alcohol first, but it was more important to stop the bleeding. Fortunately, she had a much better knack for wrapping bandages than Leelee did.

How hectic... It’s been such a busy twenty-four hours. Have I ever had a day this packed before?

As she wound the cloth around and around her hand, she thought back upon the day’s events in a daze. Or perhaps upon the past several hectic days—or rather, the whole time since she’d traded places.

For the first time in her life, she’d been told off. For the first time in her life, she’d gone outside the Palace of the Golden Qilin. For the first time in her life, she’d cooked her own meals, woven her own bed, and forgotten all restraint as she indulged in her hobbies. She’d met a charming court lady, seen a new side of her loved ones, gotten angry, laughed, rebelled, challenged herself, and at last...

“It hurts...”

As soon as she had finished bandaging her right palm, Reirin held it up to the ceiling and stared at it. Her whole body ached so bad it made her want to laugh, and her burning hot hand was trembling with exhaustion.

On that day, she had finally remembered all the negative emotions—and pain—that she had once relinquished.

“Oh...dear...”

A tear suddenly rolled down her face. It streamed down her temple, hit her earlobe, wet her hair, and then dissolved into the grass of the bed.

Unsure exactly *what* kind of tears these were, Reirin furrowed her brow in confusion. But after puzzling it over for a while, it finally dawned on her.

She was relieved.

There was no stopping the flood of tears that trickled down her cheeks. Reirin even allowed herself a sob just this once.

I had no idea...

She hadn't known that the rush of pain came only after the body relaxed.

She hadn't known that tears were something you cried out of relief.

Reirin learned both of those things for the first time that day.

Lady Keigetsu. Though the name wouldn't leave her throat, she called out to the girl in her heart. *I'm so glad you survived. I'm so relieved.*

Her own contribution might have been a trivial one, but she hoped the girl would let her join in celebrating her recovery all the same.

Tears spilling from her eyes, Reirin parroted the words “I'm so glad” over and over again.

While she understood on some level that the phenomenon of the heart's strings abruptly loosening was known as “relief,” she wasn't sure what had made her so tense in the first place. This was a first for her, after all.

If she had to guess, she had been terrified of taking another person's life through her own frailty. Alternatively, perhaps her current body, which she had pushed to its limits day after day, had dragged her mind along in its screams for mercy. Or maybe the answer was that for a long time now—too long for her to remember—she had been living life with a heart steeled.

Reirin wasn't sure—but she was fond of this strange new emotion that shook her like never before. The swaying of her heart made her feel a little helpless, but it had all the warmth of a flame or a heartbeat.

You know something, Lady Keigetsu? I really can't help but be grateful to you.

With a faint smile, she curled her right hand into a loose fist. She felt the still-bleeding wound throb in unison with her heart.

It was as she was listening to the sound of her own heartbeat that she picked up on a commotion outside the shed. It sounded like a woman walking and talking, along with two sets of footsteps approaching at different speeds.

“...said...no shape to...”

One half of the pair was Leelee. She was talking to the other person with irritation in her tone.

“I can handle the report. There's no need for a head court lady to come all this way.”

It sounded like the mystery woman was a high-ranking court lady of some kind, but whoever it was, she was too soft-spoken for Reirin to make out her voice. Once the pair had come to a stop right outside the storehouse entrance, Reirin hurried to wipe the tear trails from her face.

“Leelee? Do we have a guest? I'm up—” Reirin had managed to sit herself up and call out through the door, only to have her greeting interrupted.

“Are you awake?” came a voice as deep and cold as a snow-covered field. The one to push open the creaky door was a woman clad in gamboge gold.

It was Tousetsu, Kou Reirin's head court lady.

“Tousetsu...”

The light of her candle was blinding. Squinting into the brightness, Reirin opened her mouth to ask what she was doing there, then promptly clamped it shut. This might as well have been a reenactment of their encounter in the dungeons. It reminded Reirin of how the woman had said not to address her familiarly. The way this was headed, she was going to be berated as a sewer rat for a second time.

I need to learn my lesson already...

Embarrassed, Reirin put a hand to her face and breathed a small sigh, but much to her surprise, Tousetsu didn't tell her off for the mistake.

She only stared at the way Reirin held her cheek, then said dispassionately, “I report to you as the head court lady of the Kou clan. The afflicted has regained consciousness. Mysteriously enough, her fever did indeed begin to recede once the vibrations of the Bow of Warding started coming through more clearly—once your arrows began flying closer to the target. Not long ago, she even got up from bed and took the medicine you made for her.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news!”

“Since then, the remains of her fever have subsided, and her complexion and breathing rate have returned to normal. Thus, despite her order to draw the sacred weapon for a full night, the empress said that you needn’t pluck the Bow of Warding any longer. I expect Her Majesty will come by later to offer her thanks and—”

For some reason, she abruptly broke off there.

“Offer her thanks and apologies...”

All of a sudden, those doll-like eyes of hers were watering.

“Tousetsu? Erm, I mean...Lady Kou Tousetsu?”

“The way you wrapped that bandage.” Crystalline tears streamed down her emotionless face. “Your turns of phrase. Your smile. The way you put a hand to your cheek when you’re flustered.”

A closer look in the narrow glow of the candle revealed that Tousetsu’s hair, which had always been so flawlessly coiffed, was disheveled from exhaustion. Her thin eyebrows were drawn into a frown, and the corners of her lips were trembling.

“It really is true.”

“Huh?”

“She really did rip your soul from your body and switch it with hers.”

Tousetsu threw down the candlestick and knelt on the spot, then looked up at Reirin with a plea in her eyes.

“You *are* Lady Reirin, aren’t you?!”

Her desperate cry made Reirin's eyes waver with emotion.

She opened her mouth as though to speak, and for a while, she and her weeping court lady stared at one another in silence.

Bonus Story: Cosmetics and Her

“OH. There goes another comet.”

It was the night before the Ghost Festival.

That idle comment from Bunkou, who had poked his head out the Maiden Court cloister amid his late-night preparations for the upcoming event, prompted the Eagle Eyes’ captain to sneak a glance at the heavens himself.

High in the navy-blue sky dotted with white stars, a long-tailed comet sailed lazily by. Though it was much smaller than anything they’d seen on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, its presence was still a striking one; however, Shin-u stared up at the spectacle without any particular emotion.

“The comets have been shining brighter than ever. If this were a hundred years ago, no doubt the whole kingdom would be in an uproar over this harbinger of calamity,” his ham of a subordinate said, narrowing his foxlike eyes into a wicked smile.

Up until a hundred years ago, the comet had been considered an ill omen whose sudden advent would bring chaos or

destruction upon the kingdom. The reason it was now treated as something to wish upon like a shooting star, a whole pagoda built for the pure purpose of spectating its flight, was that the emperor of the time had declared the celestial body a good omen by way of imperial decree.

The full explanation was that a scholar-official and Daoist cultivator had predicted that a comet would come during that emperor’s reign and bring about the end of his rule. In the end, that prophecy had gone unfulfilled and the cultivator had lost his head over it, but the benefits of that imperial decree were kicking in at long last.

After taking one hundred years to reinvent itself as a good auspice, the comet was now something people all over the country were bound to be gazing upon

peacefully, their hands clasped together in prayer.

“Seeing as I hail from the old countryside, I still get a shiver down my spine whenever I see one, but I suppose it must seem like quite the beautiful sight to a bunch of city slickers.”

Perhaps it was the liberation of finishing a day’s work that had put Bunkou in the wisecracking mood. “Watch your mouth,” his strait-laced boss admonished him in a warning tone.

But the truth was that Shin-u didn’t harbor any particular loyalty toward the imperial family himself. He only bothered to keep Bunkou in line because that was his job. To put a finer point on it, neither did he care if the comet was supposed to bring fortune or misfortune.

“Leave the banter at that. A star is just a star.”

As far as Shin-u was concerned, that was the case for most things in the world.

A star was just a star. Whether people cared to interpret it as a good or a bad omen, it wouldn’t make the pallid comet shine any more or less bright.

Dissatisfied with his boss’s matter-of-fact response, Bunkou gave a shrug of his shoulders. “Good heavens. It’s no wonder the rest of the Eagle Eyes call you a stick-in-the-mud behind your back.”

“Hold on. People call me that?”

“Sure, when it comes down to it, a star is nothing more than a rock rolling around in the night sky. Love is another name for lust, and fear makes the wolf look bigger. But isn’t it human nature to romanticize finding meaning in the meaningless?”

“Answer me. Do people call me that?” Shin-u asked again, growling out the words.

“Well now,” came Bunkou’s noncommittal response at last. “If I *must* say one way or another... Then yes, they sure do.”

“...”

His frigidly beautiful brow furrowed into a scowl.

Sensing that he was in trouble, Bunkou scrambled to make excuses with a vapid, weaselly smile on his face. In conversations like these, it was a go-to trick of the eunuchs to sprinkle in a touch of self-deprecation that made it hard to argue back.

“Now, now. It goes to show how fond they are of you. In the end, all they want is your attention. Much like a woman wants to catch the eye of her dream man. But you’re so married to your work that you’ve never once responded to one of the court ladies’ come-hither looks, let alone those from the other Eagle Eyes, no? And so it is with a hint of jealousy that they wind up calling our wet blanket of a captain a ‘stick-in-the-mud.’ What can I say? It doesn’t take much to get dejected when you’ve lost such a big chunk of your yang.”

“Who is ‘they’? I bet *you’re* the one who’s been calling me that. Did you think you could fool me by sprinkling in a little self-deprecation?”

Unfortunately for Bunkou, the surprisingly sharp-witted captain had seen right through his deception. And while he was at it, he’d dropped the hint that he shouldn’t use that eunuch-exclusive brand of melancholy as a shield.

There was an insurmountable disconnect between the officials who had been permitted to keep their genitalia intact and the eunuchs who had been forced to relinquish their sex before coming to the inner court, but one would never know it from Shin-u and Bunkou’s relationship. Half of that was because Bunkou was a pragmatic man who had weighed the options of a life of poverty or losing his sex and had chosen the path of a eunuch without hesitation; the other half was because Shin-u wasn’t much for picking up on subtle emotional cues.

Both of them were a little warped in the personality department, but that was exactly what made them an oddly good match.

“What?! How did you know?”

“Who else would be a big enough fool to come right out and slander the captain of the Eagle Eyes?”

“‘Slander’ makes it sound so bad! If anything, I was praising you as a man of integrity who would never fall into temptation. Mm-hmm!”

Shin-u met that painfully insincere compliment with a cold glance. Realizing

which way the wind was blowing, Bunkou changed tactics and tried calling attention to the captain's flaws instead.

"It's just as much your own fault! It's all well and good to shut down those amorous women with your ironclad poker face, but you never bat an eye at your own subordinates' complaints or pleas either! Why, I can't blame people for worrying whether you even have a heart!"

The captain struggled to refute that point. As a matter of fact, he knew that his aloof behavior was often taken to be "charmless," and that was more or less the reason his boss had ousted him from his last workplace. His too-perfect features and steely, inscrutable blue eyes made other people nervous through their mere presence.

"It's not that I don't have feelings. I think."

His defense came out sounding weak because he wasn't too sure of it himself.

Ravished by the supreme authority that was the emperor, his mother had run off and disappeared as soon as she'd given birth to Shin-u. The people around him had handled him with the utmost caution, not to mention passed him around like a hot potato for fear of the trouble he might bring, so he'd never had a spare moment to feel lonely or sad. What's more, his family of the Gen clan was full of people without much range of emotion, so he'd never had his lack of expression or reticence set straight or even pointed out to him.

In fact, it had come as a quiet shock to him when he had ventured out into the real world and seen people who could roar with laughter or shed tears of sorrow. But of course, that category seemed to include just about every woman in existence.

After Shin-u had confessed all of this in a piecemeal fashion, Bunkou hung his head and dabbed at his eyes. Then, after a while, he gave Shin-u a gentle pat on the back. "Live strong, Captain."

"Stop that. I can see the pity in your eyes."

"Believe it or not, I'm the eldest son of my family... Whenever I see a bumbling little brother, I can't help but look out for him. Oh, I don't mean *you*, of course. No, of course not... But if you'd like, I can get you a discount ticket for

the pleasure district sometime. Best to start with a little practice talking to women.”

“No thanks.” Annoyed, Shin-u waved off the eunuch’s hand and increasingly patronizing gaze. “Hate to break it to you, but I’ve already got my pick of women.”

“Huuuh?!”

“Why do you look *actually* surprised?”

Shin-u looked miffed about the bona fide disbelief in Bunkou’s reaction.

“Uh... But how?! You’ve got all the personality of a block of chilled tofu! How could *you* manage to talk a woman into bed? Aha! You *are* a patron of the pleasure district! You pay an exorbitant amount of money to get them totally at your mercy and—”

“Now you’re really being rude.” At first Shin-u frowned, but then he gave a curious tilt of his head. “There’s no need to get money involved. Can’t you get most women falling all over you if you look at them long enough?”

“...”

Bunkou pressed both hands to his chest, a wan smile rising to his face.

“After all these years, I’ve finally learned what it’s like to want to kill someone.”

“You have issues.”

“Well, I suppose I should have seen that one coming... Though you had different mothers, you *are* His Highness’s little brother.”

“It’s rude to even compare me to His Highness. Forget looking at them—*he* can get women acting like cats in the heat just by being in the same room with them.”

A few of the Maidens were included among said titillated women, which meant he was disparaging the Maidens and comparing Gyoumei to catnip in the same breath, but Shin-u seemed oblivious to his own disrespect.

“Anyway, there you have it. I’m not hurting for romance.”

Bunkou stared at his boss, the look in his eyes getting closer and closer to that of someone gazing upon an unfortunate creature. “Captain. Just to be clear, the you-know-what you’ve had with women is not the same thing as romance. Love is something that gets the heart racing and brings all sorts of worries. Besides, for all the times you’ve done ‘it,’ it’s never been with someone you actively liked or went out of your way to pursue, now has it?”

Shin-u gave a jerk of his chin as he thought back on all his experiences thus far.

It was true that he’d never pursued any of them. Hell, he’d never felt his heart race even once.

As he watched his captain lapse into silence, Bunkou heaved an exaggerated sigh. “See this? You’re a stick-in-the-mud *and* a total amateur in love. Egads! It’s always the late bloomers like you who run out of control when love strikes at last. As your subordinate, I must admit I’m pretty concerned.”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself a ‘total amateur.’”

“But I would. Let’s assume, for argument’s sake, that there’s a woman you’re interested in. We have the beginnings of a romance. Now in a situation like this, what symptoms do you imagine a man experiences, and what do you think he ought to do about it?”

The conversation had pivoted to relationship advice, of all things.

His subordinate was turning out to be a surprisingly supportive fellow—or rather, he seemed surprisingly into the topic at hand. Though Shin-u was a little put out, he nonetheless answered the question with the first thing that came to mind.

“Take her?”

“Absolutely not!” The eunuch bared his teeth and reproached his boss without missing a beat.

Shin-u looked skeptical. Considering the only example he had to go on was his father, the emperor who had made love to his slave of a mother for the simple reason that he’d taken a liking to her, he wasn’t sure why he was being raked over the coals.

Giving a woman jewelry. Protecting her from harm. Taking her to bed. These were the only “love languages” he knew. The fact that his good looks meant he’d never experienced rejection had only reinforced this belief.

“Why not? If you like a woman, you should make love to her.”

“Tell me, how is it that your infantile level of emotional maturity leads you to the same actions as a veteran philanderer? Or have I been talking to a bear this whole time?”

With how much value the eunuch seemed to attach to emotions, Bunkou’s hands were outright shaking by this point in the conversation.

“Let’s start with what happens to a man when he falls for a lady. He gets the jitters. He loses sight of himself. Are you with me so far? These are the earliest symptoms of love. Don’t forget it.”

“Sounds like a pain.”

“And then what does he do? He woos her! He says the right words before taking her to bed! And even before that, he builds upon his feelings for her. To care for someone is to have her always in your thoughts. To worry on her behalf, to be mindful of her feelings, and to think of her problems as your own. Got that? Managing that much is the first step to a successful relationship!”

“Who has time for all that?”

When he saw the blatant look of ennui on Shin-u’s features, Bunkou at last stared off into the middle distance with a dry little smile. “I think I’ll upgrade your nickname from ‘stick-in-the-mud’ to ‘blockhead.’”

“Was that a confession of guilt I heard? You’ve got some nerve announcing your plans to step up the name-calling right to your victim’s face.” As Shin-u’s scowl deepened, he thrust his palm before Bunkou. “That’s it. Give me back the ‘bonus’ I gave you earlier.”

“Huh?! I can’t do that! Lighten up, Captain—I was obviously joking!” The eunuch flew into a panic, pressing a hand to the breast of his uniform. “I really do respect you! And I’m sure the rest of the Eagle Eyes are feeling quite charmed after today’s events. Nothing beats a boss who pays well!” he went on, diving right into a rambling accolade.

Hidden in said breast of his uniform was a precious stone. The story behind it was that on the eve of the Ghost Festival, the Kin clan had capitalized on their role as the organizers of the event to invite a plethora of makeup artists and peddlers to the Maiden Court and hold one final “business meeting” with them.

Of course, no one was going to be picking out their attire or accessories for the event the day before it happened, so the meeting was a service to their favored peddlers more than anything else. It was something of a pre-event celebration, in which merchants were invited to the decked-out Maiden Court and given the chance to showcase items they’d put away for the occasion.

During this celebration, the peddlers liked to reverentially offer their wares to even the Eagle Eyes. However, as the enforcers of the Maiden Court, accepting these goods free of charge would be seen as taking a bribe from the peddlers. As such, for generations it had been an unofficial tradition for the captain of the Eagle Eyes to begrudgingly cough up a fair sum for the items. Since this was something done at the captain’s own discretion, the money had to come out of his own pockets.

As luck would have it, Shin-u’s status as an ex-prince of sorts made him a decent living, and he was a leisureless man who had nothing to spend his money on. What’s more, he had gotten so fed up with the merchant women practically drooling over his good looks that he’d slammed down a huge sum of money to make them buzz off, not even bothering to ask for the price of the goods.

He’d pushed his resulting collection of clothes, jewelry, and cosmetics onto Bunkou, ordering him to distribute the items evenly among the Eagle Eyes. To no surprise, the eunuch had stashed the finest gem of all for himself. Though the stuff was all women’s goods, jewelry was bound to fetch a decent price on the market, and it could make for a good bargaining chip too.

He may have been a bit of a stiff and oblivious in too many directions, but Shin-u was actually quite the generous boss. Though Bunkou seemed like a friendly jokester on a first impression, he tended to be the picky sort, and even he had a high opinion of Shin-u.

“Are you sure you don’t want to keep a little something for yourself, Captain?”

From what I could tell, the garments all had cutting-edge patterns, and the ornamental hairpins were first class. The cosmetics looked gorgeous enough to be gems in their own right; a single look could send the heart aflutter!”

“No thanks. Do I look like a woman to you?”

“Oh, don’t be like that! Unlike the rest of us, you’re in a position to give a lady a little something. Your springtime of life is right around the corner!” Bunkou insisted, buttering up his boss as he thrust the goods before him.

Shin-u waved him off in annoyance. “I don’t have anyone to give it to. It’s summer right now, and autumn comes next.”

However, he abruptly paused when he noticed what sat in the eunuch’s hand: vivid vermillion lipstick. Red enough to be reminiscent of a burning flame, the lipstick was encased in a sophisticated shell dusted with gold leaf.

I wonder...

It was then that the image of a woman clad in vermillion crossed his mind.

Does she have anything ready for the Ghost Festival?

When the Lion’s Judgment was behind her—when he’d next seen her at the storehouse—Shu Keigetsu had been dressed in shabby clothes unbefitting a Maiden.

“While I must apologize, may I ask that you take your leave?”

He remembered her gazing straight at him with those unclouded eyes of hers. As polite as she’d been, she had exuded an aura so powerful that even a master warrior like Shin-u couldn’t find an opening in her defenses.

“I’d like to get her changed without any gentlemen around.”

Her voice had held genuine concern for her court lady. Even then, she’d looked beautiful right down to the very tips of her fingers. Her clothes had been scruffy and she hadn’t been wearing any makeup, but her posture and countenance had given her an air of ineffable elegance.

Aren’t cosmetics and wardrobe supposed to be a matter of life and death for a woman?

Shin-u mustered up the full extent of his imagination on a topic he'd never held the slightest bit of interest in before.

As best as he could figure from observing the Kin clan ladies earlier that day, it would be important for her to dress in a glamorous robe that would make her stand out amid the ceremony and to wear makeup that would make her face look the most beautiful of all. She was, after all, one of the Maidens who had been assembled to compete for the prince's favor. But now that she'd been forsaken by Noble Consort Shu, he doubted she had any such equipment on hand.

From Shin-u's point of view, it shouldn't have mattered what the Maidens looked like so long as they could bear a healthy child, but mayhap it would be discouraging for her to head into the ceremony looking like something the cat dragged in.

It'd be like heading into battle without a weapon.

That metaphor was what encouraged him to reach out and abruptly pluck the lipstick from Bunkou's hand. To provide a weapon to a woman preparing to wage war unarmed seemed like a reasonable course of action for the captain of the Eagle Eyes, the guardian of impartiality in the Maiden Court.

"Oho? Did you think of someone to gift this to, Captain?"

"Less gift...and more like supply," he equivocated, a vision of Shu Keigetsu with her lips painted red popping to mind.

He wondered what she would look like with an extra touch of crimson to her dignified smile. What if she added a tinge of vermillion to the corners of her powerful eyes, or a splash of pale red to her well-defined cheeks? No doubt it would be—

"No, no! Don't be silly! Gifting lipstick is one of the staples of courtship!" Bunkou clamored, pulling Shin-u out of his reverie.

"What?"

"I mean, think about it. Everyone knows that a man gives a woman the outfits he wants to get her out of, right? You give a girl clothes to undress her. Then it follows that you give her lipstick to wipe it clean...or in other words, to share a

heated kiss. That's the true meaning behind the gesture," the eunuch asserted with confidence.

Shin-u grimaced. *Meaning*. There it was again.

"Never mind. I don't want it."

"Huh? Are you sure?"

"It's yours. Do whatever you want with it."

"Uh..."

Bunkou was flustered to have the lipstick his boss had gone out of his way to take thrust back upon him. Ignoring his reaction, Shin-u spun on his heel and headed back down the Maiden Court cloister. If he didn't finish up his work soon, he wouldn't be in tip-top condition for the ceremony the next day.

Courtship? Ridiculous.

He wasn't sure what was causing the untold indignation he felt.

Despite his assertion that be it a good or a bad omen, a star was just a star, he had decided against passing along the lipstick the moment he learned that it was a symbol of courtship. After treating it as a given that he would take any girl he liked on the spot, he had attempted to put himself in another woman's shoes in what was a very out-of-character move.

But the man still hadn't picked up on the contradictions in his own behavior.

"Wait... I-Is he after *my* lips?"

For better or for worse, neither had he picked up on Bunkou covering his mouth with trepidation behind him.

Gazing out his bedroom window, Gyomei heaved a quiet sigh as he watched the comet leaving its trail.

The first person the star hurtling slowly across the night sky brought to mind was not Shu Keigetsu, who had the character for "comet" in her name. The one it made him think of was the beloved girl who would surely have seen that comet as an auspicious sign even without the imperial decree of a hundred

years ago.

Kou Reirin was the kind of person who could see a hideous mudbank and focus on the beauty of the lotus blooming there, or see a star of calamity shoot across the sky and be genuinely fascinated by its beauty.

Reirin's condition hasn't been improving at all.

His bed creaking under him as he took a seat upon it, Gyoumei gazed idly at the shelves beside him. There upon one of the moonlit, black-lacquered racks sat a small shell of lipstick. It was an item he had purchased some time ago from a peddler often patronized by his mother, Empress Kenshuu. He had been convinced that the flowery, pastel color would look good on Reirin.

However, seeing as she had been bedridden since the incident on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, he still hadn't had the chance to give it to her. Her snow-white skin was exceptionally delicate, so her court ladies had insisted that she wait to wear anything other than her own custom blends until she was back to full health. Needless to say, Gyoumei had no interest in forcing his favor upon her to the point of damaging her skin.

It's been five years now since I met Reirin.

As he stared at the lipstick elegant enough to resemble a jewel, his memory rewound itself to the day he met that wise cousin of his.

Their first encounter went a little something like this.

On the Tomb-Sweeping Festival of the year he turned fifteen, Gyoumei's mother brought him to visit the Kou estate. Due to a death on her father's side of the family the previous year, she had been given special permission to return home and visit their grave on this occasion to honor the ancestors.

"It just so happens that my niece, Reirin, will be coming to say hello. She's the most beautiful and intelligent girl I know. Look forward to it," said Kenshuu, pleased to be kicking back in her old home after a long time away.

Gyoumei replied with nothing but a polite "I will."

He'd learned the hard way that women proclaimed as "beautiful" almost

never lived up to the praise, and that “intelligent” was another word for “cunning.” What’s more, he was sick and tired of how his innate dragon’s qi inspired everyone under the sun to make advances to him whether he liked it or not.

Being a teenage boy, Gyomei wouldn’t have complained if this phenomenon had stopped at a beautiful girl shooting him a coy glance or two. However, it was a different story when it had been going on as far back as he could remember: He had been nearly abducted by his wet nurse, almost violated by a military officer, and subjected to the lustful gazes of even the eunuchs. Moreover, while the majority of women were physically harmless, their tendency to get vindictive and sabotage each other behind the scenes often proved quite the hassle. To put it plainly, Gyomei was disgusted with women as a whole at this point in his life.

Oh well. I’ll just go along with the conversation like I always do, he thought as he alleviated his boredom with the Go board set out in the room.

Though his life was made difficult by the way his dragon’s qi attracted people like moths to a flame, it was easy enough to get rid of those admirers with that very same aura. A smile and a “You’re very lovely” could silence anyone from a little girl to an old lady, and if she still persisted, the slightest of glares would see her blanch and back off.

Based on what he’d heard, Kou Reirin had only just turned ten years old. As the first girl to be born to the Kous in a long time—not to mention having lost her mother in the process—she was said to have been raised under the tender loving care of her father and brothers. To stroke her ego would be as easy as taking candy from a baby.

However, his expectations would be betrayed at the banquet hosted for the guests that night.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Reirin.”

The girl who stepped gracefully into the light of the candle was indeed as beautiful as a celestial maiden. She had smooth white skin and glossy, voluminous hair of a gentle hue. Her long eyelashes cast faint shadows across her cheeks, which were flushed the pink of a flower wet with morning dew.

Despite her still-cherubic face, the dignity in her eyes gave her an air of such intelligence and elegance that it was hard to believe she was only ten years old.

That's right: She was looking straight at Gyoumei.

The prince was genuinely taken aback by her penetrating gaze, not a trace of flirtation or enthrallment to be found.

Does this mean my dragon's qi has no effect on her?

As egotistical as it sounded, he had never met a woman who could remain calm in his presence, excluding his own mother. Yet despite Reirin's demure replies and smiles in his direction, she didn't seem the least bit bewitched by Gyoumei.

"For tonight's entertainment, let's have a performance from our clan's very own dancing girl!"

It wasn't long before the drinks were flowing and Gyoumei's pleasantly buzzed uncle—Reirin's father, that is—had proudly called his little girl over to his seat. He ordered the servants to clear a big space in the center of the round table, where he told his daughter to stand and perform a dance. It was at first with some disgruntlement that Gyoumei watched the maidservants and even the two sons rumored to be boorish louts light up with gleeful anticipation. It was true that Reirin was a refined and beautiful girl, but the reactions of those around her always felt so exaggerated.

For example, the simple act of sitting with gorgeous posture for long enough would have the maidservants so overcome that they had to dab at their eyes, and the sight of her eating her food with relish would earn a heavy-handed show of the men wiping away their tears. When she recited a poem extolling the beauty of the moon, people said, "Let's go carve that on the tombstone at once," and each time she gave a charming, bashful smile, a number of people would fall to the floor clutching their chests. That was how *everything* played out.

It seemed the girl was a bit on the frail side, and that was why the simple sight of her smiling peacefully made the Kous feel a keen sense of gratitude and swell with thanks for the Great Ancestor. Still, it seemed like a little much, if the prince was being honest.

But then...

“I dedicate this dance to the good health and continued success of Aunt Kenshuu and my dear cousin,” she said, traces of youth still lingering in her voice.

As she began her nimble dance, Gyoumei was struck speechless. The sight of her was absolutely divine.

Reirin would stretch her arms and legs like thin, taut threads, then relax as though surrendering herself to the air around her. She was the picture of elegance and grace, like a butterfly playing in the wind.

But best of all was the faraway look in her eyes. The melancholy in her gaze as she cast her eyes downward, looking past even Gyoumei as if to seek some distant place, struck the prince with the urge to reach out and hold her. He felt certain that if he didn't lock her away inside his arms, her soul would depart this plane of existence and disappear into nothingness.

By the time she was done with her dance, he found himself joining the trembling and weeping Kous in an enthusiastic round of applause.

“That was brilliant. Come here, Reirin. Have a reward from your Aunt Kenshuu. Take as much as you want of whatever you like.” Kenshuu called her niece over with excitement in her voice, her own face flushed with emotion.

Laid out over the table was a spread of cosmetics so bountiful and high-grade that one had to wonder where a woman who so rarely displayed interest in such things had gotten it all from.

Seeing this left Gyoumei cold. He hadn't expected such a pure celestial maiden of a girl to show interest in these tools for concealing oneself behind a false beauty. Yet contrary to his expectations, Reirin's face had visibly lit up at the sight.

“Wow, Aunt Kenshuu! Thank you very much. This is wonderful!”

She rushed over to the table to scrutinize each product with gusto.

Gyoumei could see no difference between her and the women who were always so engrossed in fiddling with their faces or shooting him amorous looks.

All the excitement he'd felt over her dance abruptly drained out of him.

"What do you think, Gyoumei? Isn't Reirin a great girl?" his mother asked him, a pleased smile on her face.

He played it safe. "Yes. She's very lovely."

All of a sudden, Reirin lifted her gaze and stared at him. She neither blushed with delight nor went giddy with excitement, and it didn't take long for her to go back to the task of picking out her gifts.

What was that about?

Something about that had bugged him, but he was soon distracted by his mother's badgering. "I'll bet a man of the Forbidden City knows a thing or two about cosmetics. Why don't you help me pick out a good rouge for Reirin? How about this one?"

He bit down a sigh and answered, "That looks nice."

It was another way of saying *I couldn't care less*.

At that, Kenshuu raised an eyebrow and gave a considering hum. After lapsing into a thoughtful silence, she eventually snapped her fan shut and announced, "Reirin. I'm sure you'd prefer to mull your choices over, no? I'll have my son keep an eye on you, so head into the next room over and take all the time you need. Go with her, Gyoumei."

"Mother?"

Gyoumei frowned. He certainly hadn't expected her to try getting them alone together.

Yet Kenshuu feigned ignorance. "You ought to take the chance to talk to Reirin more. Go get yourself a little lesson in life from a ten-year-old girl."

Even coming from his mother, that was quite the insult.

Disgruntled though he was, upon deciding that it would give him a good excuse to leave the banquet early, he did as he was told. It might prove an exhausting experience, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about a ten-year-old girl forcing herself on him or stripping naked where he was watching.

He and Reirin moved to the other room, and for a while he made empty conversation with a fake smile plastered on his face. However, it was then that Gyoumei noticed something. Even though the two of them were behind closed doors and in close quarters, Reirin didn't look the least bit abashed, nor did she ever stop to shoot him rapt looks. Instead, she continued to gaze intently upon the cosmetics—or to “observe” them might have been the right word.

“Oh dear. This one looks darker against the skin than I expected. That might make it difficult to apply to the whole body... On the other hand, this one looks dark at first, but it smears well across the skin. If I dissolve it in water...no, maybe mix it with oil, perhaps I can get it to spread even more smoothly,” Reirin mumbled to herself, applying rouge to the back of her hand and mixing it with the other colors.

When it came to actually trying the cosmetics on, she didn't smile proudly before the mirror but instead took her time assessing its color and the stress it put on her skin. Rather than a woman indulging herself in false beauty, she looked the part of a medicine man sorting his herbs or even a military official appraising his weapons.

“This isn't how most girls would act before a spread of cosmetics,” Gyoumei murmured in spite of himself.

“Huh?” Flustered, Reirin lifted her face and blinked her round eyes. “Where did I make a mistake? I'm taking this choice very seriously, I'll have you know.”

“Yes, I can tell. But your approach feels different from the average girl.”

“Is that right...?”

She didn't seem to have realized this herself. The confusion and apprehension he saw in her childlike eyes made Gyoumei feel bad enough to retract his statement. “But then again, I *am* a man. What do I know about makeup? How tactless of me to speak to something I don't understand. Forget I said anything.”

“My.” Reirin gave a tilt of her head, looking more and more mystified. “But men...or should I say *you* are quite skilled at putting on makeup.”

“Excuse me?”

Gyoumei was baffled. Given what ravishing good looks he already boasted at his young age, the prince had never once powdered his cheeks, nor had he played around with rouge like some of the eunuchs did.

When she saw the look of bemused exasperation he shot her, Reirin gave an embarrassed little “erm” and endeavored to choose her words carefully. “To put on ‘makeup’ means to conceal oneself to appear more beautiful, doesn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“And when you say ‘lovely,’ you actually mean ‘foolish,’ don’t you?”

Blindsided, Gyoumei gawked at her. “What?”

“Forgive me if I’m mistaken. That’s what it sounded like when I heard you earlier. And to provide another example, ‘that’s nice’ really means ‘I don’t care,’ correct?”

“ ... ”

She was neither criticizing nor taunting him. The way she asked her questions as matter-of-factly as if she were confirming, “The sun rises in the east, correct?” snatched the words right from Gyoumei’s mouth. This girl had seen through everything. Both his detachment and his despair.

However, her next words were what truly made him gulp. “But you do a beautiful job of hiding that. Instead of laying your feelings bare, you conceal them behind pretty words. I was impressed; it makes me feel like I should learn from your example.”

One look at her crystal-clear eyes told him that this was neither ridicule nor sarcasm but her honest feelings. And that made the words resonate with him all the more.

She had seen through Gyoumei’s attempts to camouflage his nastiness, but she perceived that as him taking care not to upset those around him.

It was then that the prince finally noticed something: The products Reirin had so eagerly made a grab for were not the eyebrow paint that could help her achieve a more mature look or the gold powder that would give her an air of

resplendence but the rouges and white powders of a more natural tone—the exact color of a healthy flush to the cheeks.

“Then why do *you* conceal yourself?”

He asked this on pure instinct. No—even as the question left his mouth, somewhere deep down, he already knew the answer.

The beautiful girl placed a hand to her cheek, then gave a soft giggle. “Because it makes everyone so happy when I have color in my cheeks.”

Gyoumei would never forget how the sight of her bashful, embarrassed smile had made his heart tremble.

She was still a little girl, a full five years younger than him. And yet, she was dazzling beyond measure. The mysterious urge he felt to lock her away in his arms and protect her from harm—or no, perhaps to gaze upon her in breathless silence—left him speechless for a good long while.

“I see. Then the next time we meet, I swear to bring a mountain of your favorite pastel rouges.”

When he could form words again at last, he managed to make a promise of their next encounter.

He then spent the next hour helping Reirin pick out a rouge. By the time they made it back to the banquet hall, Gyoumei was going so far as to hold her slender hand and let her use him for support as she walked.

“What do you think, Gyoumei? Isn’t Reirin a great girl?” Kenshuu asked when she saw the giddy look on her son’s face, her mouth curling into a smirk behind her fan.

“Yes,” he agreed with a nod, feeling not the slightest bit defiant.

His eyes went to Reirin as she happily showed off her prize to her brothers.

“She’s a butterfly.”

Gyoumei continued to gaze intently upon her smile as gentle as the sway of a spring breeze.

“She’s the one I want to keep in my hands and protect at all costs. *My*

butterfly.”

It was from that day forward that Kou Reirin came to be known as the prince’s butterfly.

There isn’t a woman out there better at applying “makeup” than Reirin.

Feeling nostalgic, Gyoumei gave a dry laugh as he stared at the shell of lipstick in his hand.

His butterfly had grown even more beautiful in the five years since then. Not through garish decorations but owed to a purehearted radiance that came from within. Even so, if the smile on a woman’s face could be considered another form of “makeup,” then she was without a doubt the most skilled beautician of her generation.

However...

Gyoumei squeezed the shell in his hand.

Was it wrong of me to wish to see your true face? he wondered as he caught a glimpse of the comet through the window.

The more time they spent together, the stronger Gyoumei had felt his greed grow. He wanted to see her smile. He wanted to see her happy. But that wasn’t enough—deep down, he wanted to be the one person to know everything about her, from the tears she shed in sadness to the look of her face contorted in rage.

He adored her mild-mannered demeanor and sweet smile. Yet in the hope that she might open more of her heart to him, he had made the rare wish on the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

“I wish Reirin would show me a side of herself she’s still hiding.”

Had that wish of his borne fruit? Ever since that night, she had blushed at the sweet nothings he whispered into her ear, clung to his chest, and ceased to hide her worried looks or feelings of frustration.

Shin-u, for instance, had expressed disdain for the way she purred in welcome of the prince’s constant visits; even Gyoumei had found the behavior a bit

surprising, but he had been reluctant to entertain such an opinion himself. To get all worked up the moment she showed a bit of weakness would make him a disgrace of a man. The thought that she had been pushed to such despair filled him with a fresh rage against Shu Keigetsu, and moreover, *he* was the one who had wished for a peek at her true face—her weakness—in the first place.

But still...

All the same, he felt the slightest grain of discomfort rubbing against his heart.

Tearing his gaze from the night sky, Gyoumei shook the thoughts from his head.

Tomorrow was the Ghost Festival. As the one who would preside over the ceremony alongside Kin Seika, he had to head into the event in tip-top condition. It would serve him well to go to bed early and get a good night's rest. If he woke up before dawn and managed to get his work done ahead of schedule, he could even squeeze in a visit to Reirin right before the ceremony.

As Gyoumei lay down upon his bed and forced his eyes shut, the shell of lipstick reflected the rays of the moon where it lay silently beside him.

The Kou clan court ladies clasped their hands together in prayer each time they passed through the cloister, gazing up at the comet that still sat brilliantly in the night sky.

“I wish for Lady Reirin’s condition to get better soon!”

It was the same line each and every time. Though it was no shooting star, the comet was yet another celestial body that—albeit leisurely—soared across the sky. It had become a recent habit of the girls to make wishes on the stars in hopes that it might do even the slightest bit of good. The reason being that their beloved mistress had been laid up in bed since the night of the Double Sevens Festival.

“It looks like she won’t be making it to tomorrow’s Ghost Festival... It’s such a shame. I’ve been perfecting my makeup skills for so long, hoping I’d have the chance to deck her out to the nines.”

“What’s to be done? Her health matters more than putting on a good performance for the event. Oh, but I just know that Lady Reirin would have looked as beautiful as a celestial maiden with all her gorgeous ceremonial makeup on! You know what? I think I’ll try wishing a little harder!”

“Good idea! We still have another half day until the event. There’s always the slightest chance she might bounce back in time.”

“True. It all comes down to her fighting spirit. I want to see Lady Reirin all dressed up too!”

These gamboge-clad women held a high enough rank within the Kou clan to merit the color. As a natural result, they were no less hot-blooded and tenacious than Reirin herself. Not prepared to give up hope just yet, they took a break from their work to mumble wishes to the comet under their breath.

“What are you girls standing around for?” came a voice as cold as a snow-covered field.

When the ladies turned around, there stood Reirin’s head court lady, Tousetsu, her bearing as flawless as ever.

“Forgive us, Lady Tousetsu. We were making a wish on the stars for Lady Reirin’s condition to improve.”

“I’ll acknowledge the thought behind the gesture. However, that’s no reason to stop what you should be doing. It’s expected for any court lady of Lady Reirin’s to wish for her mistress’s good health. Bear those thoughts in your heart at all times and focus them toward doing your solemn duty. Weren’t you three supposed to be on your way to the kitchen to fetch some cold water and a hand towel for Lady Reirin?”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” the ladies responded, ducking their heads. They couldn’t argue with that rebuke.

The gamboge golds scurried off down the cloister. Then, as soon as Tousetsu was out of sight, they broke into hushed whispers.

“Gosh, that was scary. I’d expect no less from our glacial head court lady. It’s a distant relation, but that must be her Gen blood in action.”

“I’ve never once seen her lose her composure.”

“It’s her Gen blood turning her whole veins cold. I doubt there’s anything in the world that could scare her. She’d never understand the hope and despair we feel over each little change in Lady Reirin’s condition.”

The court ladies sounded a tad sullen, feeling belligerent after that scolding they’d gotten.

Even so, not a single one of them doubted Tousetsu’s competence or deep loyalty to her mistress. Though she was a difficult woman, it was in the Kou clan’s nature to accept such people with open arms, and so the girls ultimately let the matter go with a light sigh.

“There’s our reliable head court lady for you.”

Hmph.

Left alone in the cloister, Tousetsu snorted with an icy look on her face.

The Gen blood ran even thicker through her veins than those girls thought. Not only did her heritage grant her superior physical prowess, but it gave her a keen sense of smell and hearing too. She had slightly sharper ears than the average person.

How lax of them to waste their time on gossip. If they have so little else to do, they might as well go pick a few herbs for Lady Reirin.

Though there wasn’t a twitch in her expression, that was the first thought to cross the exceptionally devoted woman’s mind.

Abruptly lifting her gaze to stare at the comet plodding across the sky, she murmured, “O comet above. Do you come bearing fortune or calamity?”

Nowadays, comets were something to make wishes upon like a shooting star. But seeing as she hailed from a long-established family line, Tousetsu still couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease when she looked up at the celestial body.

“Nothing in the world could scare me? Don’t make me laugh.”

Thinking back to the court ladies' gossip, Tousetsu lowered her gaze a fraction. Her long eyelashes cast faint moonshadows across her almond-shaped eyes.

Even the "glacial head court lady" known for her calm and composure had something she feared.

And that, of course, was the thought of losing her beloved mistress.

No one realized how often she checked Reirin's breathing rate and pulse while the girl lay dead to the world in bed. No one realized what palpable relief she felt and how profusely she thanked the heavens each time Reirin smiled at her upon recovering from an illness. No one had any clue what was going through Tousetsu's mind during those moments.

If there was one person who *did* have an idea of what she felt, it would be Empress Kenshoo. The woman who had ordered Tousetsu, an attendant of hers at the time, to become Reirin's head court lady for the sake of "broadening her horizons."

Kenshoo was the one who knew it all: both how deeply Tousetsu revered Reirin now and how much she had disdained her when they first met.

"It's been a year now since I met Lady Reirin."

Idly tracing the paths of the moonbeams falling upon the cloister, she thought back to the day she was ordered to become the Maiden's attendant—to begin serving under Reirin.

"You want me to become the Maiden's attendant?"

That day marked the first time Tousetsu had done the all-powerful empress the disrespect of raising her voice to her. Needless to say, it was because she was unhappy with the order she'd been given.

To be appointed the head court lady of a Maiden at the ripe age of twenty-three—and the Maiden of the clan with the greatest influence in the court, no less—was something anyone else would consider an honor of the highest order. As a matter of fact, Tousetsu had been considered one of the rookies among

the empress's attendants to that point, fortunate to so much as clad herself in gamboge gold. Her becoming the "head" of anything should have been good enough news to make her flush with emotion. Yet this was her take on the matter:

"Have I done something to displease you?"

"Now why is that your first assumption? Didn't I just say I think highly of you? Reirin is the apple of my eye. Who else am I to put in charge of the precious little girl my sister left me other than someone I can trust?"

Tousetsu's face remained devoid of expression, but her gaze dropped ever so slightly.

Kenshuu heaved a small sigh. "Please. For someone with the nickname of 'the glacial court lady,' you're an overzealous little thing."

"Only when it comes to you, Your Majesty. And if I may add, *most* members of the Kou clan are the overzealous type," said Tousetsu, taking care to casually emphasize her Kou heritage.

Kenshuu responded with nothing but a shrug of the shoulders. Likely because she knew the court lady kneeling before her had stronger Gen blood than anything else.

Tousetsu knew the fierceness of her own nature better than anyone. Most of the time, she was the aloof sort—or rather, devoid of interest in most things. Despite that, or perhaps for that very reason, as soon as she met someone worthy of her devotion, she longed to dedicate every fiber of her being to them.

As far as Tousetsu was concerned, that person was Empress Kenshuu. She had a dignified bearing befitting the title of empress. She was wise. Magnanimous. In each of those aspects, she stood on a stage that felt far out of anyone else's reach. Tousetsu had been almost ecstatic to think that she could serve as the hands and feet of such a supreme being.

It was for that reason that she had no positive feelings about her promotion. Quite the opposite: She only felt the despair of being cast aside by the mistress she was meant to serve.

Despite the rumors of Kou Reirin's outstanding beauty and talent, she was a

girl of not even fifteen years. It would have been unreasonable to expect the same things from her that Tousetsu felt from Kenshuu: the glimpses of an all-powerful ruler or that formidable air that inspired her to lay down her whole life.

“However...if that is what you command of me, then I shall do my best.”

It was all Tousetsu could do to force out that response.

Now that Tousetsu had accepted her new position of head court lady, she wasn't about to neglect the duties Kenshuu had entrusted to her. She made every effort to put together the ideal living space in preparation of Reirin's arrival.

“You must be Lady Tousetsu. I have a lot to learn, but I'm thankful to have your guidance.”

The girl she at last welcomed to the court was indeed one so beautiful that the god of calligraphy who sketched the countenances of all mortals must have made a little extra effort when flourishing his brush for her. Her face had the look of a flower coming into bloom and radiated both intelligence and grace, and although her limbs were slender, she didn't look as scrawny or gaunt as Tousetsu had feared.

However, Tousetsu didn't take well to her bashful smile or soft-spoken voice.

“I am but a mere court lady. Please call me ‘Tousetsu.’”

“Oh dear. My apologies.”

“As must I ask that you not so readily apologize to someone beneath you.”

The only person Tousetsu respected was Empress Kenshuu. She alone was like the great earth that could quell even the raging seas. Her dignity and proud, regal bearing were enough to bring the court lady to her knees.

Compared to her, though the girl standing before Tousetsu might have been a virtuous one, she didn't appear to be of a particularly high caliber.

When the girl responded to the icy reproach by saying, “My apol—oops!” and then throwing her hands over her mouth, Tousetsu had to avert her gaze.

“Stop thanking her, milady. That’s a pale yellow court lady.”

“But she went out of her way to pick flowers for me, Tousetsu!”

“Please allow *us* to apply your cosmetics.”

“Thank you, Tousetsu, but I’d like to experiment with this rouge myself.”

“You wish to serve such precious tea to the *eunuchs*?”

“It’ll just grow old and stale if I keep it all to myself. I’m sure the tea would be pleased to have us all drink it together while it’s still fresh. Drink up, honored Eagle Eyes! Thank you for your service.”

The same sorts of scenarios played out over and over again.

Reirin was a smart girl. Likely born gifted, she excelled in all the essential skills for a noblewoman—like dancing, calligraphy, and embroidery—without even needing to be taught, and she had a heart of gold to match. Still, Tousetsu thought that the way she always smiled at even the low-ranking court ladies and handed out favors at the slightest opportunity made her seem like a sycophant and that her habit of trying to do everything on her own was unbecoming of a leader.

This girl would one day become the mistress of the Palace of the Golden Qilin and the Maiden Court as a whole. Her smile, words of gratitude, and favors were not to be thrown around so carelessly.

What’s more, Reirin would always send Tousetsu and the rest of the court ladies elsewhere as soon as she had eaten supper. If this were Kenshoo, she would have persisted in her studies into the evening, playing Go or reciting the sutras with her educated court ladies.

Within ten days, Tousetsu had solidified her conclusion that Kou Reirin was not someone worth devoting her life to. However, she knew full well that to resign from her post as head court lady after such a short time would damage both Reirin’s *and* Kenshoo’s reputations. And so it was that Tousetsu sought a meeting with Kenshoo to request her private consent to step down from her role.

What she received in turn was an unexpected question.

“Say, Tousetsu. What do you normally do after the hour of the monkey?”

“Pardon?”

“Have you ever accompanied Reirin into the late hours of the night?”

“No... I have not.”

The hour of the monkey was around the time when supper ended. Since Reirin spent the remainder of her evenings holed up in her room, Tousetsu had always assumed she liked to sleep early and left her alone.

Kenshuu gave a quiet chuckle when Tousetsu faltered. She then told her, “Go have a look. Your decision can wait until then.”

Though she refused to explain herself further, the empress’s word was law. Sometime after dark, Tousetsu followed her orders and snuck over to Reirin’s room. She was adept at hiding the sound of her footsteps.

As she peered through the doorway, she saw that Reirin had already changed into her nightwear of a white robe. Her bed was made too. Everything was ready for her to lie down at any moment.

But when Tousetsu realized what Reirin was doing beside her bed in that room illuminated only by moonlight, she was struck speechless.

“Oh!”

Reirin was dancing. And very slowly, at that. She lifted her arms, then lowered them. She lifted her leg until it was parallel to the ground, then put it back down.

She would stoop down a little and then start the same process again, taking five or six breaths at a time as she did. Being a Gen woman accomplished in the martial arts, Tousetsu knew what a burden it must have been on her leg muscles and lower back to support her weight.

“Agh...”

Every now and then, Reirin would clamp her hands over her mouth like she was trying to ride out a wave of nausea. Even after that, once she had looked at

the floor and steadied her breathing, she would go right back to dancing.

Upon closer examination, there were countless sutras piled up on the shelves behind her. Plenty of other items there gave a whiff of the training she'd put herself through too: a Go board, incense and burners she must have matched together, embroidery tools, and tea utensils.

I don't believe it...

Tousetsu beheld this spectacle in amazement.

This was Kou Reirin, the girl who had always worn such a lovely smile. She had seemed like a girl gifted with bountiful talent by the heavens who did little but stand around and look graceful, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. All of her skill had been backed up by an awe-inspiring level of effort.

"Ugh," Reirin groaned again, this time crouching down on the spot. After a few long moments on the floor, she exhaled a deep breath to psych herself up and rose back to her feet. She put her training implements back in their place on the shelves, then collapsed atop her bed in a tangled heap. She managed the effort of drawing the covers around her, then appeared to fall right asleep. Nevertheless, it was clear that she was in a bad state.

Tousetsu made up her mind to do something. "Milady," she called out through the door.

There was no response.

"Milady... Lady Reirin. It's Tousetsu. I'm coming in."

When there still came no answer, Tousetsu steeled herself and stepped into her mistress's room without permission.

She then stole a glimpse at the girl sleeping in the bed. She went ahead and lit every single lamp in the room to be certain, but her complexion wasn't looking too bad. Still, finding it odd that all these bright lights hadn't been enough to wake her, Tousetsu reached out and took the girl's arm on impulse.

"What?!"

Reirin was hot. Her pulse was alarmingly fast. It was safe to assume she was ill—and that this was a pretty severe case, at that. Tousetsu placed a hand to her

forehead just to be certain, and she was burning up. The girl hadn't fallen asleep; she had passed out.

Why didn't I pick up on it sooner?! Tousetsu wondered, clicking her tongue at her own uselessness.

It was then that Tousetsu suddenly noticed something: She'd felt what seemed like white powder rub off on her fingertips when she touched Reirin's forehead.

Half disbelieving, she wet a hand towel using a water jug in the corner of the room and then wiped the girl's soft cheeks clean. When she did, a pale peach color akin to a healthy skin tone came off onto the cloth.

What appeared on the girl's face in its place was pallid skin racked with fever.

Tousetsu let slip a distressed mumble in spite of herself. "Oh, Lady Reirin... How was I supposed to know?"

It wasn't her friendly nature that had made Reirin insist on doing her makeup herself no matter how many times Tousetsu had admonished her for it. It was so that those around her wouldn't notice when she was sick.

Tousetsu swallowed whatever emotion was threatening to well up inside her and shook the sleeping girl. "Lady Reirin! Lady Reirin! How are you feeling? Are you all right?! I can call for the apothecary at once!"

"Tousetsu...?"

Her court lady's voice must have gotten through to her; Reirin's eyelids fluttered open at the call.

Yet all she did was smile an all-too-natural smile and give a gentle nod. "It's all right, Tousetsu. I've already taken my medicine. My temperature will have gone back down by tomorrow. I always end up running a fever when I get tired. It's quite inconvenient..."

The way she trailed off at the end betrayed her exhaustion, but her tone was the epitome of serene.

She moved only her eyes to look over at Tousetsu, then smiled even wider. "Sorry to make you wo—oh no, I apologized again..."

“It’s fine. It doesn’t matter. Please don’t worry about things like that anymore,” Tousetsu pleaded in a voice laced with urgency.

“Okay,” was all Reirin said in a slow murmur.

But then, right before she faded back out of consciousness, she added one last thing:

“Thanks for all that you do.”

Tousetsu lapsed into silence, her face taut with tension.

Long after Reirin had closed her eyes and fallen into the rhythmic breathing of sleep, Tousetsu remained kneeling beside her bed like the fool that she was.

She had realized the truth. This girl applied her own makeup not as a show of independence but to keep other people from worrying about her.

And there was one more thing.

When she says, “Thank you,” she really means, “Goodbye.”

The reason she was so liberal with her gratitude was so that she could part from that person without regrets.

“Lady Reirin... You are...”

In all likelihood, the girl was far sicklier than Tousetsu had believed. She’d had enough brushes with death to make her accustomed to fainting. Countless times, she must have gone to bed at night afraid she wouldn’t live to see the next morning.

That was the reason she always said her thanks. By handing out her fortune and expressing her gratitude on the spot, she could die at any moment without any regrets. That was the way this girl no older than fifteen had lived her life. She trained her body to its limits even as it was racked with illness, then hid it all behind a smile.

“You are...”

Tousetsu’s eyes swam with tears. The emotions welling up within her surged forth like raging waters, breaking the dam of her heart and flooding her entire body. It was in that moment that she unequivocally accepted Kou Reirin as her

true mistress.

That mistress of hers was the greatest makeup artist there was. She powdered her face with deception, colored her cheeks with a rouge by the name of lies, and spoke words of gratitude that actually meant farewell.

Tousetsu had never known a mistress so resolute—and so isolated from the world.

“Lady Reirin. I am your faithful servant. Please allow me to stay by your side. Please...allow me a look at your true face,” she managed at last in a tremulous voice.

She shifted her grip on the hand towel balled in her fist and used it to remove the remainder of the makeup. It couldn’t have been good for her body to keep those cosmetics on round the clock.

From that moment onward, Tousetsu became Reirin’s most faithful court lady of all.

“Allow me a look at your true face,” was it?

Gazing up at the comet once more, Tousetsu lost herself in thought. That wish was surely one anyone close to Reirin kept in their heart.

As she had beheld that star shooting across the sky on the night of the Double Sevens Festival, Tousetsu had even gone so far as to murmur the following in spirit: *Please let her learn to be more honest with me. If she would show me her true face, no matter how ugly a sight it is, I swear to give my all to protect her.*

Tousetsu stared wordlessly up at the comet. Had the star that night been a good or a bad omen? Tousetsu both did and didn’t feel like her wish had come true.

Lady Reirin has been wearing her emotions on her sleeve as of late.

Ever since she’d taken that fall from the pagoda, Reirin had changed. She’d become emotionally unstable, and she’d slept the days away without any care for appearances. But then again, it was only natural for her to be acting a little strange after what a traumatic experience she’d been through, and Tousetsu

was the one who had wished for the girl to express her emotions more openly.

But...what is it?

Tousetsu was terrified to look into it too much deeper. One wrong step could lead to her rejecting her own Supreme One under the logic that she couldn't respect a master who would show weakness. Despite that being the very thing she had wished for.

"Nothing in the world could scare me? Don't make me laugh," Tousetsu muttered again, then gave a small shake of her head to clear her mind.

After the way she had scolded those court ladies, she would be setting a bad example to spend too much time loitering around in the cloister looking up at the stars.

There was still half a day to go until the Ghost Festival. If Reirin was still the girl Tousetsu had come to know, there was every chance she might bounce back and head into the ceremony with a smile on her face. And make full use of her favorite pale cosmetics to do it.

"I'd better get the finest of makeup ready," she murmured, then went along on her way.

But some part of her knew that those cosmetics would go untouched tomorrow.

"It's time, milady."

"Thanks for letting me know, Leelee."

Inside the storehouse bathed in the brilliant morning sunlight, Reirin glanced up from where she had been using a tub full of water for a mirror, pulled her pinky from her lips, and turned around with a smile.

"Perfect timing. I just finished applying my makeup."

The moment Leelee caught sight of Reirin's full-length figure, she exhaled a deep breath that sounded something like a sigh—or maybe even a moan.

"What's wrong? Did I go too heavy on the rouge?" Reirin inquired with a small

tilt of her head.

“No, it’s not that.” Leelee shook her head, her mouth twisting shyly. “Uh... I was just surprised at how prett—I mean, that you managed to fix yourself up so well.”

“Really? Hee hee! Why, thank you!” The Maiden gave a happy tinkle of a laugh, not the least bit offended by the backhanded compliment.

She returned the favor with a completely sincere “You look lovely too,” but Leelee was too deep in thought to care. Something wasn’t sitting right with her. “Aren’t you a little *too* good at this? Like, you managed to change your entire look... That takes a level of a skill that even a master makeup artist would only reach after ten years of practice.”

“My, you flatter me!”

Reirin found it charming that her court lady had as enthusiastic an interest in makeup techniques as any other girl her age.

“But...I suppose that does make sense. That’s about how long I’ve worked at it.”

“Huh?” asked Leelee, failing to catch what she’d said.

“Oh, nothing,” Reirin replied, dodging her question with a laugh. She then held open the door to the storehouse. “Come along now!”

The once-overgrown garden was now arranged into neat rows of ridges, and at some point, she had even managed to clear away a narrow path leading to the storehouse. As she stepped out onto the bare dirt path without a weed in sight, Reirin called upon her court lady to come join her.

“It’s been some time, hasn’t it? Off we go to the Maiden Court!”

The hues of the sky were breathtakingly vivid, and the comet still sure to be leaving a pallid trail across the heavens was now completely blocked out by the dazzling sun. It was as though it aimed to spit in the face of all the wishes made upon it—whether those were to see a crush dolled up or to get a glimpse of a loved one’s true face.

Heedless of those who would be waiting there and the shock she was about

to give them, Reirin headed down the path to the Maiden Court in good spirits.

Afterword

HELLO! Satsuki Nakamura here. Many thanks for picking up this book.

I have a confession to make: I'm a big fan of plucky, eccentric heroines, and all the stories I've written so far have featured a female character who fits the bill. Don't get me wrong—I *started* on this story determined to write a delicate, fragile, and normal girl whose plight would have the readers on the edge of their seats, but before I knew it, I'd ended up with a daring, iron-willed protagonist nicknamed "Lady of Steel." Incidentally, the amount of rewrites and additions I made for this book was no less daring(?), and despite my initial plans to fit the whole story into a single volume, I ended up with way too much content. Life is full of surprises.

Still, I hope you can all cheer for Reirin with hearts aflutter.

A manga adaptation (illustrated by Ei Ohitsuji) began serialization in *Monthly Comic Zero-Sum* in tandem with the release of this book, so we hope to have your enthusiastic support on that front as well!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kana Yuki-sensei for the wonderful illustrations, along with my designer and editor. And my biggest thanks goes out to all of you for reading this book.

Let's meet again in Volume 2.

—Satsuki Nakamura, December 2020



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